

Combating Terrorism Center at West Point



# CTCSENTINEL

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FEATURE COMMENTARY

## The Threat in 2016

DANIEL BENJAMIN AND STEVEN SIMON

A VIEW FROM THE CT FOXHOLE:

## Richard Walton

An interview with the head of Counter Terrorism Command at the London Metropolitan Police

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#### FROM THE EDITOR

Our first issue of the year forecasts how the global terrorist threat may evolve in 2016. Two months on from the Paris attacks and with deadly attacks already perpetrated in Istanbul, Jakarta, and Ouagadougou, there are storm clouds overhead. In our cover story Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon predict that continued progress in the campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria could see the group double down in 2016 with increased attacks in Europe, Russia, and Turkey as well as possibly Lebanon and Jordan. But they assess that an attack under the command and control of the group is less likely in the United States. In our interview, Commander Richard Walton, who for almost half a decade has headed Counter Terrorism Command (SO15) at the London Metropolitan Police, explains how British security agencies have mobilized to confront an unprecedented terrorist threat. After the Paris attacks, France's Prime Minister Manuel Valls raised the specter of the Islamic State using weapons of mass destruction (WMD) against the West, a threat Captain Stephen Hummel assesses in his article. With no end in sight to the conflict in Yemen, Gregory Johnsen predicts both al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula and the Islamic State will continue to expand, and may, as they compete for recruits and try to outbid each other, plot attacks against the West. In the Sahara-Sahel region, following attacks on hotels frequented by Westerners in Bamako and Ouagadougou, Andrew Lebovich envisages that competition between groups aligned with the rival global terror franchises will lead to greater insecurity. Magnus Ranstorp analyzes how Hezbollah's future calculations and behavior may be affected by the Iranian nuclear deal and other regional dynamics. Kirsten Schulze provides a briefing on the Jakarta attack and the Islamic State threat to Indonesia.

Paul Cruickshank, Editor in Chief

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Cover: German police guard the Munich railway station during the New Year's Eve terror alert. GETTY



# The Global Terror Threat in 2016: A Forecast

By Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon

**The Islamic State faces serious barriers to growth. It has earned an array of capable adversaries, including the United States, Iran, Russia, and the Kurds, as well as the Iraqi government and the Syrian regime. Military efforts against the Islamic State have steadily intensified with the accumulation of intelligence against it, which has facilitated targeting, and with greater coordination among and operational competence of its diverse enemies. Its territorial losses and internal strains will erode its ability to recruit. These challenges, however, will likely prompt increased attacks in Europe, Russia, Turkey, and possibly Lebanon and Jordan. Rivalry between jihadi groups could also spur attacks by al-Qa`ida and its affiliates. An eclectic targeting strategy combined with an ability to motivate lone wolves and returnees suggest that an impenetrable defense will be difficult to mount. Yet the actual threat, especially to the United States, is relatively manageable. Despite this reality, U.S. political dynamics have generated a nationwide anxiety that could contribute to violence. In Europe, where the risks are higher, the prospects for social cohesion are bleaker.**

**W**hat will 2016 bring for the contest between the West and the jihadist movement? The only certainty is, of course, more uncertainty and surprise. But it is, nonetheless, a good bet that we will see the principal paradox of this fight—the erosion of the Islamic State's hold on its territory in Iraq and Syria against a backdrop of continued Western anxiety—sharpen inexorably. That, in turn, will make the challenge of distinguishing appearance from reality in an asymmetric conflict—the core challenge of the endeavor—a near impossibility in the fog of a U.S. national election.

The reality is that the Iraqi army and police, under the tutelage of U.S. and other Western forces, will slowly—at times imperceptibly—climb back from the ignominy of their 2014 defeat in Mosul.

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Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in Syria and peshmerga in Iraq will continue to whittle away at Islamic State territory while interdiction of its supply lines. This is already underway. Iraqi peshmerga units are cutting off Islamic State access routes to Turkey, while the United States, using air power and special operations forces, blocks maneuver routes between Iraq and Syria. The Islamic State's battlefield successes will become increasingly scarce. Territory actually controlled by the group will shrink. Although Russian airpower has been directed at armed Syrian opposition groups unaffiliated with the Islamic State, it has been directed at the Islamic State as well. And in Iraq, Iran has also contributed to the fight against the Islamic State. Russia's and Iran's tacit collaboration is diplomatically awkward but militarily convenient in the fight against the Islamic State.

## Panic and Progress

For all the measurable success against the Islamic State, panic over the group persists throughout the West as it continues to launch terrorist attacks, even as its ambitions to entrench the so-called caliphate in the Middle East fray. Public alarm has grown thanks to a stubbornly chaotic regional landscape in which jihadist violence figures prominently, especially in states affected by the turmoil of the Arab Spring. The contrast between the Islamic State's decay in the Sunni heartland and the public perception of the group as ascendant matters greatly. The success of a terrorist group depends not just on its actual strength, but also on its opponents' perceptions. This fear is stoked by a reckless media and by politicians who believe their electability hinges on pervasive public anxiety and are therefore determined to paint as dire a picture as possible. This stratagem is working, insofar as survey data show clearly that Americans, at least, feel they are under siege and at greater peril than at any time since 9/11.<sup>1</sup>

To dig deeper into the conditions driving these circumstances, consider the following. In 2016, air strikes by the United States and its coalition partners will continue to become more effective as the intelligence base grows. Collection from UAVs (unmanned aerial vehicles), a growing cadre of human sources, defectors, and slowly improving signals intelligence all combine to make the air campaign more effective. Islamic State leaders are being killed at an increasing pace;<sup>2</sup> those who survive must spend more time and energy on personal security and less on command and control.

Since the November 2015 decision to loosen restrictions on targeting<sup>3</sup> and disregard the long-term costs of rebuilding infrastructure in favor of diminishing Islamic State revenue—primarily from oil—the group's fortunes have dwindled as its income has shrunk and the costs of a multi-front war have mounted. Increasingly, the Islamic State relies on taxation of residents in the territory it controls, though perhaps extortion is a more accurate term. Such efforts to raise funds further diminishes its popularity and heightens resentment among inhabitants. The Islamic State had edged away

## **“Conventional terror attacks against a wide range of targets near and far will be intended to demonstrate the Islamic State’s vitality even as the caliphate’s deflation suggests the opposite.”**

from its strategy of intimidating the populace through overwhelming brutality; it may see no alternative but to return to it, flooding the internet with more images of decapitations, crucifixions, and firing squads in order to secure financing.

Perhaps no issue will affect the Islamic State as much as the politicking over—and within—Syria. The ability of the various parties to agree on local ceasefires and to turn their weapons on the Islamic State will be critical. With the tide having turned against the armed opposition, thanks largely to Russian intervention, the possibility of ceasefires that might presage a Syrian iteration of the Iraqi Sunni Awakening becomes more plausible, though by no means guaranteed. One development to watch out for in 2016 is a decision by the U.S. government to press the groups it backs to participate in ceasefires negotiated with the Assad regime and mediated by the United Nations. As important will be the ability of coalition forces to sever Islamic State lines that straddle the Syrian-Iraqi border.

Despite the likelihood of the Islamic State’s slow decomposition in the areas over which it now holds sway, there is only a slender prospect for a successful local or international effort to mitigate the socioeconomic malaise that ultimately underpins the jihad. The combination of unemployment, underemployment, corruption, crumbling infrastructure, environmental degradation, climate change, and deep inequality is currently beyond the capacity of outsiders to manage. There is no reason to anticipate that local efforts will succeed, or even get off the ground. The diversion of international, but especially U.S. and EU, resources to the humanitarian crisis precipitated by the Syrian civil war leaves little in reserve to ease longstanding structural obstacles to growth. And continuing violence will dampen the interest of foreign investors in the countries where their presence would be most beneficial.

Even in its best-case scenario, though, the Islamic State must cope with a worsening reputation and limited horizons. The group’s erstwhile success depended on its ability to hold territory and justify the claim it was building a new caliphate—nothing else was remotely as inspiring for the more than 30,000 foreigners<sup>4</sup> who traveled to Syria and Iraq to stake their lives on this project. As the viability of the effort becomes increasingly unlikely, the group’s magnetic pull will diminish as well.

### **Strategy and Targeting**

The Islamic State leadership will be forced, by the political economy of terror, to double-down on the strategy it adopted in the second half of 2015. Conventional terror attacks against a wide range of targets near and far will be intended to demonstrate the Islamic State’s vitality even as the caliphate’s deflation suggests the opposite. (The approach is hardly new. Al-Shabaab has pursued a version of this strategy since being evicted from Mogadishu and other cities in Somalia, targeting instead shopping centers and other civilian sites

in Kenya, Uganda, and elsewhere.) As the Islamic State’s social media output declines,<sup>5</sup> messaging about the historical achievement of the caliphate rings ever more hollow and voices of dissent multiply. That makes a surge in terrorist attacks more necessary for the group to maintain its status in the marketplace.

What will be the targets of choice? Opportunism, already an Islamic State hallmark, will continue to be a defining trait. But some countries are likely to be more affected than others. President Vladimir Putin’s own opportunistic effort to advance Russia’s position in the Middle East through a deployment to Syria will likely be punished anew by Russian-born Islamist extremists, both domestically and abroad. Sharm el-Sheikh is unlikely to be the last place where Russian aviation will be targeted, and poor security practices will make all modes of Russian transportation vulnerable. A new wave of attacks in the Russian Federation is entirely plausible. Turkey, which was late to recognize the dangers of its own support for radical anti-Assad forces, could also find its security tested, as illustrated by the suicide bombing in Istanbul on January 12 that killed 10 Germans and was blamed on the Islamic State.<sup>6</sup> Neighbors such as Jordan and Lebanon will continue to be at risk of subversion and assault. The Islamic State could probably manage a punishing raid in northern Jordan, which would be repulsed, but only after embarrassing the monarchy. With Hezbollah in control of Lebanon, the Islamic State will not be able to take territory, but it could draw blood through terrorist attacks and attempt to generate a Sunni challenge to Lebanon’s cohesion, particularly in the north.

The events that will most affect Western public opinion and, ultimately strategy, will occur in Europe and North America. Europe, already sprinting to overcome the shortcomings of nearly a decade and a half of post-9/11 underinvestment in domestic security, and subpar intelligence and law enforcement cooperation, faces the toughest test. Relatively easy access to “Schengenland” from the Middle East’s warzones will provide the Islamic State with tempting targets, and the ability to operate undetected due to encrypted communications will also test European authorities. European leaders are showing themselves to be unsentimental about suspending civil liberties when necessary. Perhaps the biggest questions of 2016 will be whether 15 years of relative complacency in Belgium—and elsewhere—can be overcome quickly and whether the pendulum swings too far, inadvertently creating new recruits to the jihad.

With its relative geographical isolation from the center of the conflict in the Middle East and layers of border security and visa requirements, the United States is less likely to experience an attack under the command and control of the Islamic State, though no defenses are foolproof. A not-so-lone wolf who responds to the pleas of Islamic State operatives abroad is entirely possible.<sup>7</sup> Islamic State–designed attacks in Europe, much like the two strikes in Paris in 2015, will reverberate loudly in the United States, and the ability of Middle East–based Islamic State fighters to operate in Europe, as they did in Paris, could profoundly shake confidence on both sides of the Atlantic.

The effort to stop the flow of aspiring foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq will intensify, and the work to prevent veterans from returning from Islamic State–controlled lands will continue to be ratcheted up throughout the West. This undertaking will come at some cost to many of the veterans who, if they survive the fighting, will return exhausted and disillusioned to their home countries and will be unlikely to carry out attacks. For the United States and other

nations that have struggled to gain traction in countering Islamic State narratives, it could prove extremely valuable to have these burned-out cases discuss their experiences. Such accounts would certainly be difficult to repudiate and might have a genuine impact on recruitment and radicalization. Nonetheless, given the obvious imperative to maximize security, few officials will be eager to risk giving Islamic State veterans anything other than a trip to prison, and few authorities are likely to devote time or effort to backing such individuals.

The competition between al-Qa`ida and its affiliates and the Islamic State could dramatically affect the security landscape. Al-Qa`ida's need to reassert its leadership of the global jihad may encourage it to attempt a spectacular attack against a Western target. This would, in effect, reaffirm the superiority of its strategy, which aims to compel Western withdrawal from *Dar al-Islam* (Muslim lands), over one obsessed with the near-term reestablishment of a caliphate. Al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) remains, in the view of many experts, the group most capable of such a strike, and it has benefited from the turmoil in Yemen since the Houthi takeover and subsequent Saudi and Emirati military campaign. Since the Islamic State has turned to out-of-area attacks, a race to see who could inflict the most damage is entirely possible. The establishment of the shadowy Khorasan cell in Syria may support this conjecture.

The all-embracing approach to targeting that has characterized jihadist operations since well before 9/11—including all modes of transportation, hotels, schools, shopping malls, sports stadiums, other public places of assembly, military bases, oil and gas installations, and, of course, warships—suggests that point defense will be difficult. Although jihadist tactics are conservative, in the sense that they have not yet made a serious effort to stage mass casualty attacks using chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear weapons (CBRN), they will remain wide-ranging. Bombs, MANPADS, armed assault, hostage-taking, hijacking, and assassination are all likely tactics. The availability of suicidal personnel confers an extra edge on the jihadis' tactical inventory. Faced with this array of ap-

## **“Al-Qa`ida's need to reassert its leadership of the global jihad may encourage it to attempt a spectacular attack against a Western target.”**

proaches, successful attacks must be expected.

Sectarianism sells even better than anti-Western sentiment in the wake of the 2003 Iraq war and rise of the Islamic State's precursors. The reasons for this deserve more research, but since 2012 it seems likely that mobilization of Sunni powers against the Assad regime and heightened tensions with Iran have played a key role. Consequently, AQAP may perceive it can reap greater benefits in terms of recruits, donation, and popularity by fighting the Houthis and establishing itself as a champion of Sunni interests. Indeed, the group may benefit from the impression that it is more moderate and predictable than the violently sectarian Islamic State, which has established a foothold in Yemen and may use it to target Saudi and U.S. interests. Sectarian tensions in Iraq and Syria and the wider region, will continue to fuel the rise of jihadism.

In areas where there are few if any Shi'a, such as the Maghreb and Sahel, attacks against Western targets will likely continue, as the killings at the Bamako Radisson suggest. This dynamic will likely put ever greater swaths of global territory off-limits for investment and travel in the near future. That tendency will be accelerated by the perception that global security is decaying and that personal security is more imperiled than ever by a rash of indigenous “pop-up” insurgencies that may challenge weak and/or failing states across large stretches of the Muslim Middle East and Africa. Despite some improvements to Egyptian military capabilities, the Islamic State affiliate, Wilayat Sinai, and other jihadist groups profiting from the repression of the Sisi regime will continue to grow. And Baghdadi's recent menacing rhetoric<sup>8</sup> toward Israel may be an

indication that the Sinai group or Islamic State forces in Syria are preparing to strike at Israel, which, if successful, would be a major public relations coup for radical Islamists.

### **Attacks in the West and their Implications**

The chaos across the Middle East and Africa, however, will be of secondary concern next to the violent acts by lone wolf terrorists in North America, Europe, and Australia, and the implications those hold for relations between non-Muslim majorities and Muslim minorities. Whether the Islamic State is seen to be ascendant or under threat, some individuals



*This image from an Islamic State video shows one of its fighters in Yemen.*



will feel moved to aid in its historic struggle. Though the incidents will be typically low-tech and low-casualty, media coverage will be intense. After Paris and San Bernardino, targeting may seem increasingly random as militants interpret Islamic State guidance to strike infidels wherever and whenever possible. That the relatively low numbers of victims are statistically insignificant will carry no weight with those who view Islam as an unwanted presence in the West. Those people will be tempted to use the emotional impact of the attacks as grist for their xenophobic demagoguery.

Attacks carried out by lone wolf terrorists are, as so many have commented, extraordinarily difficult to prevent because of the perpetrators' limited interaction with broader extremist communities. The pressure, therefore, to increase surveillance on Muslim communities will continue to rise, as will calls for community leaders and members to cooperate with police. Many will see it in their interest to do so, but others—possibly many—will view these entreaties against the backdrop of hostile rhetoric and resent the demands and the pervasive suspicions. Alienation and, possibly, radicalization will grow, exacerbating tensions. Already, in the United States and elsewhere, hate crimes against Muslims are on the rise,<sup>9</sup> and the outlook for communal relations is hardly encouraging. There is nothing irreversible about any of this, and in some communities,

authorities and Muslim leaders will work to ease tensions and build trust. But the pressures on all sides will be considerable, and as political figures vie to show who will be toughest on terrorists, the atmosphere could become even more poisonous.

It is beyond the scope of this essay to examine all the damage that might be done by these dynamics. Two potential consequences, however, are worth highlighting, both related to the mounting refugee crisis that was caused in large measure by the developments in Syria and other collapsing states. Barring any political miracles, refugees will keep heading west and north, but are likely to face closed borders that will both increase the likelihood of a humanitarian catastrophe and greater radicalization.

A second possible outcome is the decay of the European Union, which now faces its greatest crisis. Having survived the Greek financial crisis, the European Union is unlikely to collapse, but the internal strains are increasing sharply. Its ability to enforce norms is weakening, as the example of Hungary and its mistreatment of refugees demonstrates. As the European Union's power wanes, so too will its institutions' ability to be a positive force for relations between non-Muslims and Muslims and its ability to mitigate deteriorating situations beyond its borders. **CTC**

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# A View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Richard Walton, Head, Counter Terrorism Command, London Metropolitan Police

By Paul Cruickshank

**Commander Richard Walton has headed the Counter Terrorism Command (SO15) at the London Metropolitan Police since June 2011. He joined the Metropolitan Police Service in 1986 and has spent the majority of his career in the field of counterterrorism, including Irish and international terrorism, and has been twice commended for preventing terrorist acts in the United Kingdom. He assisted in the coordination of the police counterterrorism response to the 2005 London bombings and headed up police counterterrorism efforts to protect the 2012 London Olympics. He undertook the review that recommended the merging of Special Branch with the Anti-Terrorist Branch, leading to the creation in 2006 of the Counter Terrorism Command (SO15), which now has more than 1,700 officers and staff in 60 specialist units.**

**CTC: How has the threat evolved since you took over Counter Terrorism Command in June 2011?**

**Walton:** The threat has increased exponentially. Back in 2011, U.S. drone attacks against al-Qa`ida in the FATA [*Editor's note: Federally Administered Tribal Areas in northwest Pakistan*] and other regions had created a significant breakthrough in the fight against terrorism. But the Syrian civil war has been a massive game-changer, and it's affected pretty much every country in the world with a Muslim population. In the last two years, 2013 to 2015, we've seen a surge in the Syria-related threat, both at home and overseas. Syria is not like Afghanistan. It is right on our doorstep, and it has been easy for extremists to get to, including via Turkey. The threat is complex, diverse, and one we've not seen before. It is a challenge for many countries around the world. We're arresting, charging, and convicting more people for terrorism offences than we ever have done before.

**CTC: In the wake of the recent Paris attacks, what is the assessment of the Islamic State threat to the UK?**

**Walton:** We're still operating at a UK threat level of "severe," which means an attack is highly likely. We are concerned about Daesh's external ambitions to project their terror overseas rather than them just trying to consolidate their so-called caliphate. [*Editor's note: The UK government and police use the term Daesh to refer to the Islamic State.*] And it's deeply concerning what happened in Paris on a range of fronts. That was a complex, well-organized, arguably sophisticated attack by a significant number of individuals. For there not to have been any real indications beforehand is disturbing to

those who are in the counterterrorism field. This war in Syria is not going to be resolved in the short-term, nor the threat of terrorism emanating from it.

**CTC: What has been your response to the growing threat?**

**Walton:** What we're trying to do is get further and further upstream of the threats. Some countries have a kind of goal-line defense approach to terrorism, which is almost like reacting when they're coming over the hill at you with their guns pointed and you react to that threat. We're trying to interdict further up the pitch so it doesn't reach the goal-line defense because when you're at that goal-line, it's almost too late, particularly with the nature of this Daesh threat.

I'm putting more officers upstream around the world to help capacity building in other countries, and we're augmenting those already there, in some difficult places. We've developed, particularly over the last five years, an international network, including a strong working relationship with the FBI, the Australians, the Canadians, and our European counterparts. We have responded to terrorist incidents overseas by deploying our capabilities, including after the In Amenas gas facility attack in Algeria, the Westgate mall attack in Kenya, and the Sousse beach attack in Tunisia. We regularly deploy both reactively and proactively overseas to assist countries in building their counterterrorism capabilities, particularly in the Horn of Africa, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Middle Eastern and Gulf states. We're doing more work with our foreign counterparts than ever before.

**CTC: What are the lessons learned from confronting terrorism in the UK that can be useful to other countries?**

**Walton:** We like to think we're the best-in-class in terms of our capability, in terms of police counterterrorism capability. The British CT model is unique in several ways. Firstly, because of its history, how long we've been doing it—over 130 years.

The second unique aspect is there are no silos in our approach. Because different agencies have had to work together for so long in the fight against terrorism, particularly during the Irish era and more recently now with the international, Daesh-related threat, we have developed joint protocols, systems, and policies and procedures. I speak to MI5 [*Editor's note: the UK's domestic security service*] every day. I've got MI5 intelligence officers in my buildings, and I've got my officers over in their buildings. It's a completely united endeavor, and it's totally unique. I challenge anyone to find a model like that anywhere in the world that is so joined up. And that was a deliberate decision, particularly post the 2005 London bombings, but also pre-dating that. Several other countries are struggling with this concept because they have intelligence services doing one aspect of counterterrorism and they have police services



Richard Walton

LONDON POLICE

doing another, and they're not joined up. And this can be the Achilles heel of a country's CT machine.

The third difference between our model and some other countries is our engagement policing model—policing by consent. We place particular priority in investing in relationships with our communities, including our Muslim communities, to understand them and to engage with them. This is the central tenet of our “Prevent” program, which we've had in place for about a decade.<sup>a</sup> I couldn't do all my arrests, searches, and convictions without the support of Muslim communities. It's critical to what I do. Some countries are struggling with this and are realizing they are in need of a “Prevent” program like ours.

**CTC: What are the most important tools you have in thwarting terrorist plots?**

**Walton:** We have this phrase, “Communities defeat terrorism.” Terrorism traditionally has been defeated by good covert intelligence, and that's what we've relied upon over the years, whether it's the interception of communications by intelligence agencies or human intelligence sources. And those do still play a big part. But with the nature of this particular Daesh threat, it's becoming more important to have connectivity with the wider community, with social services, with health, with education because that's where you can prevent radicalization from germinating.

Some of this radicalization is happening in bedrooms via social

media, so it's not going to be intercepted by phone calls across satellites. It's not going to be intercepted necessarily by good intelligence coverage in Syria. But it might be intercepted by a schoolteacher actually spotting a young lad who's got beheading videos on his phone. So increasingly, we're seeing our leads coming from that space. It's still obviously important to have covert intelligence, but we're seeing an increase in reporting on people who are of concern from schoolteachers, health services, psychiatrists, and so on. When we get that information, we can interdict and we can prevent terrorism.

**CTC: And that's because Muslim communities in the UK itself have become increasingly aware of and alarmed about the threat that the Islamic State poses?**

**Walton:** Yes. And increasingly they're stepping up, increasingly they're realizing that they need to step up, that they need to engage with us. So we've got good relationships. There are over a billion Muslims in the world. We are monitoring a tiny fraction of those, and we have the support of the vast majority of the Muslim communities in London. We are confident of this because they contact our anti-terrorism hotline. They ring us, talk to us, and refer people to us. They're even referring, sometimes, their own sons and daughters, even though they know that there is a risk that they may get arrested. They'd rather have them arrested on the way to Syria than actually becoming a jihadi or a jihadi bride when they get there. We're confident we've got their support because we've always engaged with communities and we're particularly engaged with the Muslim communities at the moment. It is a critical part of our CT machine, and it's something that a lot of countries don't have.

**CTC: And that close relationship between the police and the local communities provides the possibility of off-ramps?**

**Walton:** We would always rather prevent than arrest, prosecute, and convict. But the model is a rule-of-law model. We fight terrorism through the rule-of-law, but if we can interdict before, in the vulnerability space, when the young people are vulnerable before they get into the criminality that's attached with terrorism, then it's much better to do that. So a lot of our work is interdicting with vulnerable people, and that's moving up the pitch, including into that space where you've got youth issues and mental health issues.

**CTC: In the wake of the Paris attacks what is the concern that the Islamic State will dispatch more European recruits home to launch attacks against the UK and other countries conducting air strikes against it?**

**Walton:** We are concerned about that. It's clear that Daesh are targeting the countries involved in the coalition against it. But, remember, there are over 64 nation-states now in the America-led coalition. There are many nation-states now providing some element of military resource or capability, so it's not just UK and France or America who are potentially in the crosshairs.

**CTC: Are you seeing evidence of a greater external operations emphasis within the Islamic State?**

**Walton:** The statistics of Daesh-related terrorism over the past year support this belief and obviously the Paris attack is the most horrific example of that. It was not a spontaneous act of terror. It was a very well-planned mass-casualty attack. It would have taken a long time to train those operatives. They were well-trained. They used high-caliber weaponry and suicide vests. And of course they had to

<sup>a</sup> The “Prevent” program aims to stop people being drawn into terrorist-related activity and is a key part of the UK counterterrorism program.



get across a number of countries from Syria into Paris. So that is operational planning.

It looks like they've made a conscious decision to project their terror externally in the way that al-Qa`ida also did. And the range of attacks we've seen from Daesh, the range of methodologies, the sending of trained individuals back to different countries or across different countries, all of that points to a great deal more external activity. In the early days, their focus was perhaps more on building their so-called utopian Islamic state according to their rules. But I think we've seen a different posture in the last 12 months.

**CTC: This external plotting is being directed by the senior leadership?**

**Walton:** You have to assume that.

**CTC: Are you seeing evidence of the Islamic State starting to provide specially tailored training for terrorism attacks back in the West?**

**Walton:** Yes. With the Paris attack, the evidence was there for all of us to see.

**CTC: The Paris attackers were able to obtain Kalashnikovs. What is the concern that Islamist terrorists aiming to launch attacks in the UK could get hold of these kind of weapons?**

**Walton:** There is no room for complacency, but it's clear there's an availability of firearms on the European mainland that is just not replicated here in the UK. And we've got some sea around us, so it's much more difficult to get guns into the UK. This is a critical difference in the UK, even compared to our counterparts in Europe, in terms of the threat from Daesh and marauding terrorist attacks.

The obvious conclusion is one of our biggest vulnerabilities has got to be our own border with Europe. We, like every country in Europe, are looking at tightening our borders because everyone is asking the same question: How did they get that level of weaponry?

**CTC: How would you quantify the difference between the UK and other countries on access to firearms?**

**Walton:** I think the statistics are irrefutable in terms of the availability of arms and the numbers of firearms-related incidents. Take London as the capital city of perhaps 10 million people; I don't know how many times we the police actually use a firearm on the streets of London, but it's usually around about ten times a year. There are cities in the world where that's every hour, that sort of discharge. We still have a predominantly unarmed police force. We know that our criminals can't get a hold of arms very readily. We know that and we're doing everything we can to suppress the availability of firearms. I should also note we have no intention of routinely arming our police.

**CTC: In mainland Europe, there is this nexus between petty criminality, terrorism, and radicalization. Presumably in the UK there is a similar nexus but the key difference appears to be people in these circles in the UK generally don't have guns.**

**Walton:** We see those touchpoints between crime and violent extremism, and one of the places where we see that most in evidence is, of course, in prisons where criminals are mixing with extremists. And that's not a good mix. We're doing a lot of work in prisons to try to prevent our convicted criminals from becoming radicalized in prison.

**“We see those touchpoints between crime and violent extremism, and one of the places where we see that most in evidence is ... in prisons where criminals are mixing with extremists. And that's not a good mix.”**

**CTC: The official British figure is that 800 extremists have traveled to Syria and Iraq from the UK and about 400 have returned. Is this just an estimate? Or is it a hard number in which you can identify every single one of those people?**

**Walton:** It's more the latter than the former. It's not an exact science knowing who's come back and who hasn't come back. Some of that is partial intelligence, but it is not purely an estimate. It's a hard number based on actual assessment.

**CTC: European officials have told us that it is sometimes difficult to obtain enough evidence to charge those who have returned from Syria with crimes because it's difficult to prove they linked up with terrorist groups in Syria and difficult to prove they even entered Syria from Turkey. Is obtaining the evidence to prove travel to Syria a challenge you're also running into in the UK?**

**Walton:** Yes, it is. It's a dilemma we face all the time. In terms of returnees, you've got the whole spectrum. You've got your charity worker at one end of the spectrum and trained terrorists returning from Daesh training camps at the other end. And you've got all shades in between. The important thing is to get the assessment right—what are you dealing with? We can use Prevent strategies on those that are on the cusp of extremism but did not go to fight. But if there is intelligence suggesting individuals have trained in Daesh training camps, of course we are going to put more attention on them, including running substantial covert operations. You're often in the territory of not knowing whether they're disenfranchised and unhappy with Daesh or whether they are a sleeper for Daesh. So we will do a range of disruptive interventions on these individuals, some quite soft interventions, some much harder.

**CTC: Are you seeing a drop-off in the number of foreign fighters traveling to Syria and Iraq from the UK?**

**Walton:** Not really—and if there has been one, it is only marginal. We're still seeing people travel and families travel, too. The Turkish border has become less porous. So there's less opportunity there. But there's lots of different routes into Syria. We're seeing some quite convoluted routes, which they've been using. Flying to Belgium or Holland, and then going to Germany by land, and then driving across Europe. Initially, many simply flew to Istanbul then crossed the Turkish-Syria border.

**CTC: How good is cooperation now with Turkey on tracking foreign fighters?**

**Walton:** We've got very good relations with the Turkish National Police. I've got officers over there working with them in Turkey, several officers. We've had good cooperation, particularly in the last

12 months. We've asked them for interventions in the cases of young families that have tried to get to the so-called caliphate, and they've done that and sent them back. The Turkish border is less porous than it was because of the actions the Turks themselves have taken, which is helping.

**CTC:** SO15 has been heavily involved in the investigation into the attack that killed 30 British tourists on a beach in Sousse, Tunisia, in June. Prime Minister Cameron has spoken about a link to the Islamic State in the attack. Are you seeing evidence of the Islamic State command and control in the Sousse beach attack?

**Walton:** That was clearly a well-organized attack by a trained individual as part of a group. It was not spontaneous. It was clearly Daesh-inspired or -directed.

**CTC:** The director of the FBI, James Comey, and others have spoken about the "going dark" phenomenon—encrypted communications, which allow terrorists to communicate in more secure ways. Can you describe to me how that is posing challenges here in the UK specifically?

**Walton:** In a recent terrorism case we knew during a quite lengthy covert operation into them that they were using covert, encrypted iCloud-based apps. And we knew we couldn't see what they were communicating because of the encryption.

So you can imagine the dilemmas we had in that case. You're running a covert operation; you know there's a risk to public safety here. But yet you can't see what's being said and sent between the suspects who are plotting. It was only after we had made the arrests and interdicted that we got from their phones some of those conversations retrospectively.

It's a good example of the FBI director's point about "going dark" because previously in operations of these kind you would have been able to intercept their communications. But while we got hold of bits, we couldn't rely on getting hold of it all. This speaks to the point that in terrorism investigations these days you might even know the suspects are communicating with these apps but you can't see it. And that's quite a difficult position to be in if you're running the operation. And it means we're going to have to interdict earlier. And that means our evidence might be less substantial. Once knives were purchased in that case we couldn't afford to wait any longer, even with surveillance coverage.

**CTC:** When you get the phones on which suspects were using these apps, then can you extract the messages?

**Walton:** Not always, but sometimes.

**CTC:** Because sometimes you can get the phones and it's completely gone because of these "self-destruct" features. It's not even possible to get the data out of the phones?

**Walton:** It depends on the technology of the app and the capability of your own people to analyze it. I've got some phenomenal experts who can extract data off phones and off digital media more generally. But it's changing all the time. New apps, new encryption.

**CTC:** Are you calling here in the UK, like the FBI and others, for some of these manufacturers, in Silicon Valley and elsewhere, who are developing these apps to provide law enforcement with ways they can have a lawful warrant to access that kind of data?

**Walton:** That's our Investigatory Powers Bill, which is just about to go through our House of Commons. It's the second time we've tried to legislate on this issue. The legislation was not passed in the previous parliament. And obviously we're hoping other countries will follow, not least America. But even with the bill, there are some limitations because you've got service providers in different countries that operate outside of international law.

**CTC:** What's the biggest change in the operating environment that you've seen since taking over as head of SO15?

**Walton:** We've got now this huge volume change in the threat that's so challenging for us in the complexity and the diversity of it. It's not just young men traveling overseas that are now of concern. Whole families are going. We didn't think we would be in the position of having to safeguard children from being taken to a war zone controlled by a terrorist group.

**CTC:** How do you confront radicalization?

**Walton:** We've got to get to the point where counter-extremism is mainstreamed in our society. It's just seen as just another ill, like drugs, like all the other ills that we teach our children about when they go through school. I'm afraid we're in the space where we need to inoculate our children against extremism, and the earlier the better, the way that we do it in the drugs field. It's taken us a while to get to this understanding. How do you prevent this stuff from happening? Because at this command—SO15—we can make the arrests, we can get the convictions, we can put people in prison, but that's suppressing the problem. It's not dealing with what's driving the problem. We've got to do something more. And that's why I am so supportive of our Prime Minister's drive to create an effective national counter-extremism strategy, which has made clear that the "Prevent Duty" is not just a police duty but a community-wide responsibility, including schools, universities and prisons.<sup>b</sup> It's early days but there has to be a counter-extremism strategy in order to deal with the underlying causes of this particular brand of extremism.

We're getting about 600 referrals a month in this country from our Prevent initiative from our community. That's a lot. They come in to various agencies from all parts of the community including social workers and teachers. And often the concern is not so much radicalization but vulnerability to radicalization. Once we get the information we can refer them to different agencies for different actions. And in some cases we do pick up leads from it, for example when we are warned "this guy is planning to go to Syria." At that point we can make an intervention. At a time when some parts of our covert operations are "going dark," this community-intelligence is growing and is increasingly important.

Of course, when we speak of radicalization, let's not forget that we've also got the very real threat from right-wing extremism that is potentially flourishing on the back of this Daesh threat. We've had a number of operations against extreme right-wing individuals who were planning to conduct acts of terrorism against Muslim communities.

b The Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 placed a duty on certain bodies in the exercise of their functions, to have "due regard to the need to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism."

**CTC: How much is social media driving radicalization?**

**Walton:** It's quite clear that social media is driving a lot of the radicalization but not entirely. We're finding that the worst form of radicalization is a combination of social media with face-to-face contact. Hence, we're doing a lot of operations against al-Muhajiroun, who are affiliated with Daesh and are a proscribed organization. They are radicalizers and are fermenting the extremism that leads further down the track to acts of terror.

The Brusthom Ziamani case is the best example, a 19-year-old Londoner who was radicalized in a rapid time—just 12 weeks from the point of conversion to then wanting to carry out a beheading attack.<sup>c</sup> He was radicalized that fast not just through social media but predominately through face-to-face contact, which all the academics say is more potent. If you combine face-to-face grooming, if you like, with exposure to social media online and all the propaganda that's being churned out by Daesh, you've got that potent mix.

**CTC: Given the scale of the threat, do the counterterrorism services in the UK have the toolkit that they need from a resources point-of-view, given the amount of people that need to**

**be monitored?**

**Walton:** We have a huge capability now. Nearly 2,000 people. We have a whole range of expertise in different fields. We've had growth in our resources last year. We've asked for and been given more resources this year as part of the government's "Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR)." So we are going to grow again in resources, and we need to.

**CTC: What is your prognosis for 2016?**

**Walton:** I think this challenging environment will continue throughout 2016. As well as Syria and Iraq, we are also concerned about parts of Libya, Yemen, and the increasing ungoverned spaces around the world where there are opportunities for terrorism to flourish.

It's not going to be resolved in the short-term. Even if a peace deal were signed in Syria tomorrow, we're still going to be challenged on the terror threat in the intervening months. And there is no sign of a peace deal yet on the table. So regrettably, I think we're going to be facing serious terrorist challenges into 2016 and beyond. **CTC**

<sup>c</sup> Ziamani was convicted in 2015 of an August 2014 plot to behead a soldier and sentenced to 22 years in prison. "Soldier Beheading Plan Teenager Brusthom Ziamani jailed," BBC, March 20, 2015.



# Hezbollah's Calculus after the Iran Nuclear Deal

By Magnus Ranstorp

**Lebanese Hezbollah operating in concert with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is crucial to the survival of the Bashar al-Assad regime. At the same time, Hezbollah is facing multi-front wars against Israel and an array of opponents both inside and outside of Lebanon. This article explores Hezbollah's calculations and behavior after the Iran nuclear deal. While Hezbollah is overstretched and under stress, its leadership is still prepared for the next major military confrontation with Israel. This coming conflict and Hezbollah's use of terrorism will be determined by Iranian hardliners and by Israel's targeted actions against Hezbollah's security operatives.**

Sir Mark Allen, a former senior British MI6 officer, said at the outset of the Syrian civil war: "Understanding Syria and Lebanon is like playing three-dimensional chess underwater with all the pieces moving simultaneously."<sup>1</sup> This "many moving parts" analogy explains perfectly Hezbollah's complex behavior. It fits with the closely embedded, patron relationship Hezbollah has maintained with Syria and Iran since its foundation in 1982.<sup>2</sup> It also fits with the complexity of Hezbollah's multi-front wars—propping up the Syrian regime through close cooperation with Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), battling against Sunni jihadi groups in Lebanon and in Syria, and preparing for a major war against Israel. Simultaneously, Hezbollah's terror architecture is closely intertwined with Ayatollah Khamenei and his agenda. Operationally, Hezbollah also functions closely with the IRGC-Qods Force and the Iranian intelligence service MOIS in the execution of terror.<sup>3</sup>

Since 2012, Iran (with Hezbollah) and Israel have been locked in a shadowy intelligence war, which has led to a campaign of terror and reciprocal assassinations around the world.<sup>4</sup> Some of Hezbollah's most important operational cadres have been targeted by Israeli assassination efforts. These same operatives have been targeted by financial sanctions from Washington. At the same time, Hezbollah operatives have been arrested for plotting several terror attacks against Israeli targets. This article will examine how the recent nuclear deal with Iran has affected Hezbollah and its leadership's calculations.

## Hezbollah-Syria-Iran Axis in Syria

Hezbollah's behavior can only be explained by understanding the

three-decades-old and close-knit Syria-Iran-Hezbollah Axis of Resistance, which has been balanced through the convergence of shared regional and local interests.<sup>5</sup> For Syria, Hezbollah's military contribution alongside the IRGC has been decisive for the very survival of the Bashar al-Assad regime. Hezbollah's efforts in and around Damascus, combined with recapture of the Qalamoun region and the M5 highway linking Damascus with the coastal region, have been crucial. Hezbollah's military contribution has given it significant leverage over Syria and has augmented its freedom of movement.

For Iran, Hezbollah is the most successful example of its efforts to export the revolution abroad and allows it to participate in the Arab-Israeli conflict, using Hezbollah as military leverage and a pressure point against Israel. It also consolidates the resurgent Shiite axis, stretching from Tehran through Baghdad to Beirut. Iran provides extensive military equipment and financial support through a web of channels, from the IRGC and Iranian banks to parallel Iranian charitable institutions within Lebanon.<sup>6</sup> Although Hezbollah makes semi-independent decisions, Iran's influence over the decision-making processes can be seen by the fact that Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of Hezbollah, is Ayatollah Khamenei's representative in Lebanon.<sup>7</sup>

Over the last three decades, Hezbollah has worked in close concert with IRGC commanders to increase its guerrilla and warfighting capabilities in southern Lebanon. Recently Hezbollah operated with IRGC advisers and commanders to provide life support to the Syrian regime, a combined effort with other Shiite militias under the overall direction of the legendary IRGC head Qassem Suleimani.<sup>8</sup> Since the 2006 Lebanon War, secret Iranian weapons shipments to Hezbollah have continued, and the group has allegedly amassed between 80,000 and 100,000 missiles and rockets, all pointing toward Israel.<sup>9</sup> Many of Hezbollah's rocket launchers are strategically placed in high-density population areas in an effort to ensure maximum civilian casualties if opponents attempt to destroy the rockets. Hezbollah has built a web of underground tunnels along the Lebanon-Israel border. There, tens of thousands of rockets are stored.<sup>10</sup> Evidence also exists that Hezbollah is practicing for urban assaults against Israeli villages and towns.<sup>11</sup>

## Hezbollah's Calculus in Syria

Hezbollah's own involvement in Syria has been complex, costly, and controversial inside the movement. More than 1,000 Hezbollah fighters have been killed in Syria since the conflict began in March 2011, compared with 1,276 killed fighting the Israeli occupation over a 15-year period.<sup>12</sup> As Iran has increased its commitment to preserving the al-Assad regime, it has left Hezbollah with little choice than to follow suit. Initially Hezbollah provided advisers and training to Syrian paramilitary forces, but ultimately was dragged into the conflict directly.<sup>13</sup> The frequency of Hezbollah funerals sparked an internal debate about why it sent fighters to protect Syria when the

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focus should be to protect Lebanon from Israel. Some argued that Hezbollah was engaged in an endless war and that it distracted it from confronting its main enemy—Israel.<sup>14</sup>

Hezbollah responded by justifying its involvement in Syria as a pre-emptive war to ensure that Hezbollah and Lebanon would not eventually fall victim to Sunni extremism.<sup>15</sup> It was necessary, in this argument, to take the fight to Syria before Sunni extremism reached Lebanon. Hezbollah would do so by defending Shiite villages along the Syrian-Lebanese border and defend the Sayyida Zaynab shrine in Damascus.<sup>16</sup> For Hezbollah though, its involvement in Syria presented both costs and benefits.

The military costs and rising levels of Hezbollah casualties, combined with demands for compensation from the families of so called martyrs, have placed a burden on Hezbollah's finances. These were further strained when Iran was forced to reduce its support to Hezbollah because of the pressure from Western sanctions. Hezbollah has also lost experienced senior commanders and soldiers on the battlefield in Syria, forcing it to divert significant additional manpower and resources from southern Lebanon to Syria. Between 6,000 and 8,000 Hezbollah fighters are in Syria and Iraq, which is a large percentage of the group's main fighting force, and it has between 30,000 and 50,000 fighters ready to be mobilized.<sup>17</sup>

Hezbollah's involvement in Syria has also led to retaliation in its strongholds in the southern suburbs of Beirut. A series of suicide bombings and assassinations by Sunni jihadi extremists have shattered Hezbollah's reputation for security and its sense of invincibility. This new vulnerability has been reinforced by Israel's targeted assassinations of Hezbollah operational figures in both Lebanon and Syria.

There have also been benefits from its involvement in Syria. Hezbollah's military engagement in Qusayr, Qalamoun, and Aarsal has strengthened its urban warfighting capabilities.<sup>18</sup> It has also burnished Hezbollah's image as the protector of Lebanon from the Sunni jihadi threat, especially when it operates alongside Syrian military forces directly in the battlefield. For younger Hezbollah recruits, the fighting in Syria has given them invaluable combat experience. Hezbollah has also expanded its operational theater against Israel, coupling southern Lebanon with the Golan Heights. This provides them with strategic depth in its confrontation with Israel. Hezbollah's interlocking relationships with Syria and Iran have ensured that it is committed to the survival of the al-Assad regime. It has also allowed for newly forged links with a myriad of Shiite militias in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere.<sup>19</sup> There is even a small contingent of Hezbollah advisers working with Houthis in Yemen under the supervision of the IRGC.<sup>20</sup>

Some argue that Hezbollah is overstretched as it continues to fight on multiple fronts and that it cannot afford to open a new front with Israel.<sup>21</sup> Hezbollah is losing a significant number of fighters. Others point to the fact that Hezbollah has acquired warfighting skills and is intensifying preparations for the next conflict with Israel.<sup>22</sup> Parallel to this, Hezbollah has created paralysis within Lebanese politics by blocking the election of a new president. Hezbollah is meanwhile maneuvering to present itself as a viable alternative government.

### Hezbollah's Position After the Iran Nuclear Deal

Starting in 2014, Iran had cut Hezbollah's funding because of austerity policies, international sanctions, and the burden of heavy financial assistance to Syria combined with a backdrop of falling

**“There are fears that a deepening of the power struggle in Iran over the successor to Ayatollah Khamenei, combined with the Supreme Leader's health concerns, could seriously jeopardize the nuclear deal.”**

oil prices. Hezbollah's financial problems were exacerbated by its continuing efforts in Syria. This has resulted in Hezbollah cutting back on social services, firing employees, and experiencing some problems with paying suppliers and officials their salaries on time.<sup>23</sup> Even funding for its satellite station al-Manar has been scaled back. Compounding these financial difficulties have been allegations of corruption within Hezbollah that have hurt its reputation.<sup>24</sup>

After sanctions on Iran were lifted in July 2015, Hezbollah's financial difficulties were resolved. There was an influx of Iranian funding directly controlled by Ayatollah Khamenei, especially to underwrite Hezbollah's military and security architecture in Lebanon and Syria.<sup>25</sup> Khamenei's vast financial empire Setad (also known as EIKO) and its subsidiaries will be free to trade thanks to the nuclear deal, giving hardliners more opportunities to fund Hezbollah and the IRGC.<sup>26</sup> The deal strengthened Hezbollah's position within Lebanon as the main political winner, effectively countering the pro-Saudi March 14 coalition. Hezbollah has been pushing new electoral legislation (*al-Nissbya*), which would give it a decisive political advantage. Even Sheikh Nasrallah is talking in terms of Hezbollah having regional influence.<sup>27</sup> For Iran, the issue of the EU listing of Hezbollah as a terror organization, and its desired removal from this list, could be used as a potential bargaining chip as Iran opens up its markets to the West.

Some have argued that lifting the sanctions will inevitably increase Hezbollah's aggressiveness at home and abroad.<sup>28</sup> Others have argued that Hezbollah is preoccupied in Syria and less interested in jeopardizing its hard-won gains and stability in Lebanon or in going to war with Israel.<sup>29</sup> Unlike IRGC-Qods Force, which seeks confrontation with Israel, Hezbollah appears to prefer a cold war with Israel in which conflict remains contained along pre-established lines of deterrence.

There are, however, fears that a deepening of the power struggle in Iran over the successor to Ayatollah Khamenei, combined with the Supreme Leader's health concerns, could seriously jeopardize the nuclear deal. If Iranian moderates succeed in sidelining hardliners in the Assembly of Experts (which elects the Supreme Leader), it may push these hardliners into activating IRGC-Qods Force and Hezbollah on several fronts. If hardliners lose serious ground in Iran's clerical hierarchy, it may result in terrorist attacks designed to goad Israel into activating another Hezbollah-Israel war or Hezbollah activating its vast rocket arsenal against Israel. War by proxy against Israel would galvanize the hardline Iranian revolutionary forces. It would divert moderate tendencies into a united posture against a common enemy.

All this depends both on the composition of the Assembly of Experts, which is decided by elections on February 26, and who ultimately succeeds Ayatollah Khamenei. Hardline candidates for Supreme Leader, who would push Iran toward more radical policies,

include Mesbah Yazdi, Ahmad Khatami, and Mojtaba Khamenei.<sup>30</sup> Hardliners are particularly opposed to Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who proposes that the Assembly of Experts choose a council of leaders instead of a single ayatollah who serves for life.<sup>31</sup>

Hezbollah's agenda and behavior is not only determined by its relationship with Iranian hardliners and IRGC-Qods Force, but also pressures affecting both its financial operations and security procedures.

### Financial Constraints

In parallel to lifting the sanctions on Iran, Washington has significantly tightened fund transfers directed toward Hezbollah. The U.S. Department of the Treasury has continued to impose targeted sanctions against key operational Hezbollah leaders. In July 2015, Mustafa Badr Al Din, Ibrahim Aqil, and Fu'ad Shukr were named for their roles in coordinating or participating in Hezbollah's support for al-Assad's government.<sup>32</sup> These sanctions also target Hezbollah front companies and businessmen.

In July 2014, the U.S. Department of the Treasury targeted several electronic firms around the world, alleging that they were part of Hezbollah's procurement network supplying dual-use technology for its unmanned aerial vehicles operating over the Lebanon-Israel border and in Syria.<sup>33</sup> It has also targeted significant Hezbollah supply networks in West Africa.

Washington's serious efforts to move against Hezbollah funding dates back to 2011 when it seized \$150 million in assets from the Lebanese Canadian Bank. The U.S. Department of the Treasury charged that the bank "had transferred hundreds of millions to buy used cars, which were then shipped to Africa. Part of the cash was then sent to Lebanon via a Hezbollah-controlled money-laundering network and significant payments went to Hezbollah."<sup>34</sup> Since 2011, the U.S. government has accelerated its crackdown on Hezbollah funding through far-reaching money-laundering probes in Europe, North America, South America, and Africa.

Efforts in the United States to intensify financial pressure have continued every year since 2014 when the U.S. Congress passed the Hezbollah International Financing Prevention Act. The law punishes international financial institutions that knowingly en-

gage in business with Hezbollah and its backers. It also specifically identifies the satellite and internet providers of its television station al-Manar. These measures have forced Hezbollah to avoid using Lebanese banks or financial institutions, relying instead on bulk cash smuggling through Syria.<sup>35</sup> It has also led to al-Manar being dropped by Saudi-operated ArabSat, one of the main satellite operators in the Middle East.<sup>36</sup> This move comes as Saudi Arabia has imposed sanctions against 12 Hezbollah leaders and businesses.<sup>37</sup>

### Security Pressures

Since the assassination of Imad Mughniyeh in 2008, Hezbollah has suffered several security setbacks. Israel succeeded in assassinating key operational leaders such as Hassan al-Laqqis, head of Hezbollah's weapons technology and communications unit, and Jihad Mughniyeh, who was in charge of the Hezbollah's Golan Heights unit.<sup>38</sup> An IRGC-Qods Force general, Mohammad Ali Allahdadi, also died in the same incident together with five other Hezbollah leaders. Again in December 2015, Israel allegedly killed Samir Kuntar, a Lebanese militant who had served 30 years in prison for murder before he was swapped in a prisoner exchange between Israel and Hezbollah in 2008. Kuntar had replaced Jihad Mughniyeh as the head of Hezbollah's Golan Heights unit.<sup>39</sup> Hezbollah's leader Nasrallah vowed revenge on Israel: "It is our right to revenge [Kuntar's] assassination, and we will pick the time, place, and manner to do so as we deem appropriate."<sup>40</sup> These security setbacks are a major concern to Hezbollah and Wafic Safa, its security chief, as it is clear that Israel has managed to penetrate the organization.

Hezbollah's security problems extend to its External Security Organization (ESO). A number of operatives have been caught conducting reconnaissance missions and plotting attacks against Israeli targets abroad. It is suspected that Cyprus was a staging ground for a broader Hezbollah terror campaign within Europe. Just before Hezbollah's terror attack in Burgas, Bulgaria, in July 2012, Cypriot authorities arrested Hezbollah operative Hossam Taleb Yaacoub, a dual Lebanese-Swedish citizen who had conducted surveillance on Israeli tourists. He confessed to having received weapons training from Hezbollah and to acting as a courier in Europe.<sup>41</sup> Also in 2012, another Lebanese-Swede was arrested in Thailand on charges related to illegal possession of three tons of ammonium nitrate.<sup>42</sup> A third case involves Hussein Bassam Abdallah, a dual Lebanese-Canadian citizen, who stockpiled 8.2 tons of ammonium nitrate in Cyprus and who was jailed for six years in 2015 for plotting terror attacks against Israeli or Jewish targets<sup>43</sup> these cases show that Hezbollah operates simultaneously on multiple fronts and continues to plan terror operations, in concert with IRGC-Qods Force, principally against Israeli or Jewish targets abroad. Hezbollah and IRGC-Qods Force operate jointly in target selection and operative training. The Mughniyeh family, Mustafa Badreddine (indicted by the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon for the 2005 Rafiq Hariri assassination), and the Hamadi clan are all part-and-parcel of this close-knit operational circle.<sup>44</sup>

Hezbollah's calculus regarding the use of terrorism is complex, and factors in the dynamic trade-off between its position within Lebanon, its involvement in Syria, and its so-called red lines with Israel. Ultimately, decisions about terror and war are determined in concert with Ayatollah Khamenei and IRGC-Qods Force and whether the outcomes would be in alignment with Iranian agendas and overall interests. For now, Hezbollah will seek revenge but not war. It will, however, respond with terror operations against Israeli



*This image from a Hezbollah video shows a rocket launcher and one of its fighters in Syria.*



and Jewish targets abroad, especially if senior Hezbollah operational figures are targeted by Israel. It is not a question of if, but when and where. There will be terrorist operations planned in response to the killing of Mughniyeh and Kuntar as Israel knows that Nasrallah always follows through on his threats.

A regional war between Israel and Hezbollah (and Iran) is brewing on the horizon. Hezbollah's advanced warfighting capabilities and experience in supporting big offensives have given the organization the necessary confidence should a conflict with Israel be initiated.<sup>45</sup> It will be far more serious than the 2006 war, with huge civilian casualties on both sides. This is part of Hezbollah's calculus.

It is determined by changing dynamics in the Syrian conflict and by strategic consultations with Ayatollah Khamenei and the IRGC. Iranian political rivalry between reformists and radicals determines Hezbollah adventurism and violent action. The situation with Hezbollah is also shaped by Israel's pre-emptive targeting of Hezbollah military sites and high-value leaders and operatives. If either Hezbollah or Israel miscalculates and makes a bold targeted response, it may lead to a disastrous spiral of escalation on both sides. For now though, Hezbollah remains preoccupied with its military adventure in Syria. **CTC**

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# Al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State Benefit as Yemen War Drags On

By Gregory Johnsen

**Yemen is in the midst of a bloody and chaotic civil war that benefits both al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the Islamic State. As the war continues, AQAP will attempt to acquire and govern more territory while the Islamic State will seek to further radicalize local populations by grafting an Iraqi-style sectarian war onto the existing conflict. Both groups vie for recruits and territory, and their competition could also spark attacks outside of Yemen as AQAP and the Islamic State attempt to demonstrate that they, and not their rival, are at the forefront of the jihadi movement.**

For much of the past year, Yemen has been embroiled in a brutal and messy eight-sided civil war that involves the country's former president, its current president, al-Qa`ida, the Islamic State, the United States, Saudi Arabia, a rebel group in the north, and a secessionist movement in the south. The fighting has all but destroyed the idea of Yemen as a nation state. Today, Yemen is a fragmented collection of mini-statelets and spheres of influence, each of which is ruled by whomever commands the most powerful force. The central government has ceased to function.

Yemen's internationally recognized president, Abdu Rabu Mansur Hadi, spent much of 2015 in exile, while his Saudi hosts carried out hundreds of bombing runs on Yemeni targets. Saudi airstrikes, which are supported by U.S. intelligence, have destroyed much of the country's infrastructure and decimated Yemen's military and security services, including millions of dollars in equipment provided by the United States itself. The units that have not been destroyed are largely confined to various bases across the country and are unable to patrol or conduct counterterrorism raids. As a result, the constant warfare has opened up significant space for al-Qa`ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the local branch of the Islamic State.

## Background

In late January 2015, the Houthis, a Zaydi-Shi'a revivalist group from northern Yemen that has long resisted central control, took over the government. They forced President Hadi to resign and then kept him under house arrest for a month before he was able

to escape to Aden in the south and from there to exile in Saudi Arabia. In the wake of the Houthi takeover of Sana'a, the United States and several other countries closed their embassies and the United States withdrew special forces advisers, who had been assisting the Yemeni government in targeting al-Qa`ida forces.

In late March, at the request of President Hadi, Saudi Arabia began bombing Houthi targets inside Yemen. At the same time, the U.S. government announced that it was creating a Joint Planning Cell to assist Saudi Arabia in target selection.<sup>1</sup> Within weeks, it became clear that Saudi Arabia's air campaign would not, on its own, be enough to dislodge the Houthis and restore Hadi to power in Sana'a. At that point, the Saudis had three choices. They could double-down on what thus far had been an ineffective strategy and order more air strikes. They could withdraw and allow the Houthis to declare themselves the victors.<sup>2</sup> Or the Saudis could go all-in and inject ground troops into Yemen. In the end, the Saudis decided on a modified version of the third option. Several allies, such as Egypt and Pakistan, refused to commit ground troops to the war in Yemen, but others such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) agreed to contribute forces. By late 2015, there were 4,000 coalition troops in southern Yemen, mostly from the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Sudan.<sup>3</sup> Although, as *The New York Times* reported, many of the UAE troops are actually Colombian mercenaries trained by the former founder of Blackwater Worldwide.<sup>3</sup>

Not surprisingly, none of these developments has made a negotiated settlement any more likely, and the growing civilian death toll is helping both AQAP and Islamic State attract new recruits in Yemen as well as opening up territory into which the groups can expand. From the outside it appears as though Yemen is following Syria down the path toward a seemingly intractable civil war. In such an environment both AQAP and the Islamic State will continue to grow, and this article will assess what each is likely to attempt as the war continues into 2016.

## AQAP

For most of its existence in Yemen, AQAP has tried to solve a single problem—how to hold territory without exposing itself to destruction from the air. In 2011 and 2012, against the expressed wishes of Osama bin Ladin, AQAP attempted to hold and administer territory in the governorates of Abyan and Shabwa. The experiment in implementing Islamic law did not go well. Even as AQAP attempted to address local grievances, such as an inadequate sewer system and water problems, it also made a number of unpopular decisions such as establishing *hudud* (severe punishments for crimes that the

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a This was never really an option for Saudi Arabia's new king, Salman, who along with his son and deputy crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, have staked their foreign policy credentials on a successful outcome to the war in Yemen.

group believes Islam mandates) and restricting the qat trade (a mild narcotic common in Yemen).

After AQAP was forced from Abyan and Shabwa in the summer of 2012, Nasir al-Wuhayshi, the then-leader of the organization, wrote a lessons learned letter to his counterpart in Mali.<sup>4</sup> Among other things, al-Wuhayshi advised a slow approach to implementing Islamic law. “You can’t beat people for drinking alcohol when they don’t even know the basics of how to pray,” he wrote in a letter later obtained by the Associated Press.<sup>5</sup>

Al-Wuhayshi’s learned lessons have been at the heart of AQAP’s latest attempt to hold territory in Yemen. In early April 2015, shortly after Saudi Arabia initiated its bombing campaign in Yemen, AQAP fighters took over the eastern port city of al-Mukalla. They looted banks and military posts, but stopped just short of declaring their control over the city. Instead, AQAP has preferred to rule through a civilian council<sup>6</sup> drawn from local elders.<sup>7</sup> This compromise is AQAP’s latest attempt to solve the riddle of how to govern without opening themselves up to air strikes or alienating the local population. Throughout its history, AQAP has proven itself an effective guerilla group, but it has never quite mastered the art of governance.

Even in al-Mukalla there have been problems. In January 2016, the group appeared to go back on al-Wuhayshi’s advice on *hudud*, stoning to death a woman accused of adultery and prostitution.<sup>8</sup> And by attempting to hold territory, AQAP acquires an address, which makes it vulnerable to U.S. air strikes. Throughout 2015, several of the group’s top leaders, including al-Wuhayshi, were killed in U.S. strikes. Wuhayshi’s replacement, Qasim al-Raymi, is AQAP’s former military commander and a man who has been with al-Wuhayshi since both men escaped from prison along with 21 others in February 2006. Al-Raymi is a talented and innovative commander, and he is likely to continue al-Wuhayshi’s push for territory, particularly as the Islamic State continues to challenge the AQAP for recruits and legitimacy with a more hardline approach.

Both AQAP and the Islamic State are benefiting from the Saudi-led war in Yemen. As Saudi air strikes target Houthi fighters and military units loyal to former President Salih, AQAP can move into the newly cleared territory. In December 2015, AQAP did just that, retaking two of the towns in Abyan that it had held in 2011 and 2012.<sup>9</sup> In the town of Ja`ar, which had previously served as the group’s de facto capital, AQAP killed the deputy commander of the city’s Popular Committee and reestablished control over Ja`ar, which AQAP refers to as Waqar. A video released by the group on December 29, 2015, shows a small group of armed men preparing for a raid, as well as a corpse that the group claims is Ali al-Sayyid, the deputy commander of Ja`ar’s Popular Committee.<sup>10</sup> It is unclear if AQAP is prepared to implement the lessons it learned from its last attempt to govern Ja`ar, such as those outlined by al-Wuhayshi in his letters to militants in Mali as well as those by Adil al-Abab in the same trope, or if it will revert to form as it appears to be doing in al-Mukalla.<sup>11</sup>

AQAP has also dispatched fighters to conflict zones such as Taiz, where they join the local resistance against the Houthis and make local allies. One of AQAP’s primary goals is to integrate itself into Yemeni society. By fighting the Houthis alongside Yemenis, AQAP is creating new alliances, which its leaders believe will serve them well in the future. AQAP has also tried, although not always successfully, to get Yemen’s tribes to submit to Islamic arbitration.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the group is also fighting the Saudi-led coalition,

## “What is left of Yemen’s military is too busy fighting other enemies to engage AQAP, and the Saudis are focused on rolling back the Houthis.”

which is largely based in the southern port city of Aden. Both AQAP and the local Islamic State affiliate have dispatched fighters to Aden where each group is active in an assassination campaign against top security officials. Prior to the Saudi-led bombing campaign, AQAP appeared to be in trouble. This is no longer the case. The group is acquiring more territory and, once again, is growing.

AQAP’s expansion is unchecked because there is no one on the ground to put any pressure on the organization. What is left of Yemen’s military is too busy fighting other enemies to engage AQAP, and the Saudis are focused on rolling back the Houthis. In the midst of Yemen’s civil war, AQAP is able to pursue more territory and to plot, plan, and launch attacks. In recent months, most of these attacks have been directed at targets inside Yemen, but AQAP’s growing rivalry with the Islamic State could lead to plots against targets in the West.

Indeed, on January 10, 2016, AQAP released a nearly eight-minute audio message from Ibrahim al-Asiri, AQAP’s chief bomb maker, critical of Saudi Arabia’s decision to execute several prisoners days earlier.<sup>13</sup> Although much of the international attention focused on Saudi Arabia’s decision to execute Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr and three other Shi`a dissidents, which led to a break in relations with Iran, the other 43 prisoners were Sunnis, many of whom were militants affiliated with al-Qa`ida. Al-Asiri commemorated these dead and threatened both Saudi Arabia and the United States, warning of more attacks.

### Islamic State

In November 2014, the Islamic State’s leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi announced that he had accepted the *bay`a* (oath of allegiance) from supporters in Yemen.<sup>14</sup> In the year since that announcement, the Islamic State has augmented its operations significantly in Yemen and now claims to be active in at least eight governorates. Their expansion in Yemen has followed a similar pattern as those in Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and other places. After pledging their support to al-Baghdadi as the caliph, Islamic State supporters announce the creation of a group tied to a particular piece of territory, which the Islamic State refers to as a *wilayat* (state), and then they start carrying out attacks.<sup>b</sup> The first Islamic State attack in Yemen—a dual suicide attack in March on two mosques in Sana`a—killed more than 130 people.

In Yemen, the Islamic State is following a familiar playbook. Just like in Iraq, where Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the group’s spiritual founder, sparked a sectarian civil war by bombing Shi`a mosques, the goal in Yemen seems to be a radicalization of the religious land-

b The Arabic term *wilayat* is distinct from *dawla*, both of which are often translated as “state.” *Wilayat* is a smaller unit of administration, similar to individual states in the United States, while *dawla* refers to a nation state, or collection of states.



scape and the grafting of a sectarian war on to the country. The initial attack in March 2015 targeted what the Islamic State later claimed were “Shi’a mosques” in Sana’a. They were actually Zaydi mosques, where both Sunnis and Shi’a prayed. Sectarian strife of this type is a relatively new phenomenon in Yemen. Zaydis and Shafi’is have intermarried and worshipped together at one another’s mosques. In fact, Yemen’s Shi’a, the Zaydis, had become so doctrinally close to Sunni Islam that some scholars referred to them as the fifth school of Sunni Islam.<sup>15</sup>

The war is changing that. Almost all sides now see themselves as taking part in a sectarian war, which has only further fractured the country. Saudi Arabia is fighting the Houthis, whom it regards as a Shi’a militia backed by Iran. Both AQAP and the Islamic State are also fighting the Houthis, which the two Sunni groups view as heretics, as well as the Saudi-led coalition. As part of its alliance with Saudi Arabia, the United States is aiding in the war against the Houthis while also targeting AQAP and the Islamic State with drone strikes. In Yemen’s dizzying war, each side has several enemies.

The Islamic State’s primary goal throughout 2016 will be to further divide the country through sectarian attacks, recreating an Iraqi-style Sunni-Shi’a civil war in Yemen. The more sectarian the war becomes, the stronger the Islamic State will grow as it seeks to portray itself as the true defender of Sunni Islam. Already, the group has cast itself as more hardline than AQAP. In Yemen, AQAP adheres to rules of engagement such as refraining from bombing mosques; the Islamic State has no such limits on its attacks.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, much of its strategy, dating back to Zarqawi’s time in Iraq, has emphasized exactly these types of attacks as a way of attracting recruits who might otherwise be drawn to AQAP.

### AQAP vs. the Islamic State

The competition between AQAP and the Islamic State is likely to become more strident in 2016 and may result for the first time in

sustained fighting between the two groups. Both organizations are fighting for the same audience and drawing from the same pool of recruits, and each has taken a different approach to the same problem. AQAP and the other al-Qa’ida franchises have focused primarily on defeating the West and overthrowing corrupt Arab regimes as a way to bring about God’s rule on earth. The Islamic State, on the other hand, has concentrated its energies on killing Shi’a and others it classifies as deviants. Both want to establish a caliphate. They just differ on the means. Al-Qa’ida favors a bottom-up approach, attempting to build popular support before announcing the establishment of an emirate. Islamic State relies on a top-down model, announcing the caliphate as a way of attracting followers.

In Yemen, this difference in approach has led to splits in the jihadi community. In fact, the Islamic State’s earliest recruits in Yemen were disaffected members of AQAP who had grown tired of the organization’s time-consuming approach to building a caliphate, acquiring territory, and implementing Islamic law. The Islamic State’s quick rise to prominence in Iraq and Syria, and the declaration of the caliphate in June 2014 inspired these dissidents and eventually led to their defection. Even the head of the Islamic State in Yemen, a Saudi known as Abu Bilal al-Harbi, was once affiliated with AQAP.<sup>17</sup> Although the two groups are rivals, this has not yet led to the sort of open warfare between the two groups already seen in Syria. Instead, both sides seem content to fight the same enemies—the Houthis, Saudi Arabia, and the United States—and argue back and forth in videos and press releases.<sup>18</sup> These jihadi debates and disagreements, however, may have real world consequences as each side tries to attract more followers through more and more spectacular attacks in a dynamic scholars have referred to as terrorist outbidding.<sup>19</sup>

### Attacks in the West

Throughout 2015, AQAP and the Islamic State in Yemen focused primarily on domestic enemies, particularly the Houthis. However,



*In this image from an Islamic State video fighters train in Yemen.*

as the rivalry between the two jihadi groups grows in 2016 this may change. AQAP has already demonstrated its desire and ability to carry out attacks against targets in the West, and the Islamic State appears eager to follow suit. AQAP's chief bomb-maker, Ibrahim al-Asiri, is still at large and has likely trained several apprentices. Al-Asiri has repeatedly called for attacks on the United States, both in his January 2016 audio message as well as in a letter from July 2015 in which he says that "America is first" among targets for AQAP.<sup>20</sup> The head of AQAP, Qasim al-Raymi, has recently made a similar claim, referring to the United States as "the primary enemy."<sup>21</sup> Similarly, recent AQAP videos such as the "Guardians of Shariah" have celebrated past plots against the West including those carried out by AQAP.<sup>22</sup> The unanimity of voice and message suggests that AQAP, while growing in Yemen, is refocusing its attention on the United States. This seems to be a calculated decision

by an organization that needs to up-stage its rival both at home and abroad. AQAP is confident that, in the midst of Yemen's chaotic civil war, it can carry out attacks without facing the devastating repercussions that followed when Yemen had a functioning government.

Unlike AQAP, the Islamic State has traditionally had limited control over attacks against targets in Western nations, either by allowing returning fighters to plan and carry them out on their own or by asking supporters in the West to conduct them. However, Islamic State attempts to usurp AQAP may lead the group to either call for more attacks in the West, which tend to draw more media attention and help with recruiting, or plan attacks from Yemen. The same calculations are driving both groups, and as they try to out-manuever each other in 2016, each will look to stage a spectacular strike against the West. **CTC**

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# The Islamic State and WMD: Assessing the Future Threat

By Stephen Hummel

**The Islamic State is actively seeking weapons of mass destruction and, to a limited extent, it has used such weapons in Syria and Iraq. It is also actively seeking personnel with technical experience capable of expanding its program. The Islamic State's program faces many challenges and logistical issues, however, that have tempered their ambitions. This means the group is not yet capable of striking Western nations with WMD, though it cannot be ruled out that the Islamic State could deploy rudimentary chemical devices against the West in the next several years.**

*"If Muslims cannot defeat the kafir (unbelievers) in a different way, it is permissible to use weapons of mass destruction, even if it kills all of them and wipes them and their descendants off the face of the Earth."*

—Saudi jihadi cleric Nasir al-Fahd.<sup>1</sup>

**O**n November 19, 2015, a day after French police thwarted a second-wave attack by Islamic State terrorists in Paris, France's Prime Minister Manuel Valls raised the specter of the Islamic State deploying weapons of mass destruction (WMD) against the West. "I say it with all the precautions needed. But we know and bear in mind that there is also a risk of chemical or bacteriological weapons," he told the French parliament.<sup>2</sup> Australia's Foreign Minister Julie Bishop had earlier sounded the alarm on chemical weapons in June 2015:

*"The counter-terrorism landscape is changing so rapidly that long accepted paradigms can quickly become obsolete. Apart from some crude and small-scale endeavors, the conventional wisdom has been that the terrorist intention to acquire and weaponize chemical agents has been largely aspirational. The use of chlorine by Daesh and its recruitment of highly technically trained professionals, including from the*

*West, have revealed far more serious efforts in chemical weapons development. Daesh is likely to have amongst its tens of thousands of recruits the technical expertise necessary to further refine precursor materials and build chemical weapons."*<sup>3</sup>

In light of these warnings and the Islamic State's documented use of crude WMD devices in Syria and Iraq, this article explores what is known about the group's WMD capabilities and the current logistical challenges that are containing its ambitions in this area. The article outlines how despite current intentions and active recruitment of technically trained personnel, the Islamic State is not yet capable of striking Western nations with WMD, though it cannot be ruled out that the Islamic State could deploy rudimentary chemical devices against the West in the next several years.

## Nuclear

Among WMD, nuclear weapons cause the largest amount of destruction, yet they are the most difficult to develop or obtain. To develop a nuclear weapon, the Islamic State would first require enough fissile material<sup>a</sup> to support a sustained chain reaction. The specific quantity required is determined by the weapon design, but generally involves several kilograms of highly enriched uranium. The other significant limiting factor is the scores of physicists, engineers, and metallurgists required to construct the device. Fighting over the past five years throughout Iraq and Syria has created an intellectual drain in the region. In the distant chance that the Islamic State could assemble nuclear scientists to develop the weapon, it would have to conduct tests on weapon designs and construction methods in order to confirm that a nuclear detonation would actually occur in the final device.<sup>b</sup> These tests would easily be detected by intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets (ISR), which would presumably trigger a kinetic response from other parties.

Since the Islamic State lacks the personnel and material to build a nuclear weapon, purchase on the black market becomes the most likely path to acquisition. The Islamic State raised this possibility with its May 2015 claim that "it could buy a nuclear weapon through Pakistan within the coming year."<sup>5</sup> Although the assertion sounds far-fetched, the group has significant liquid assets from oil sales and other sources of revenue.<sup>6</sup> These assets imply that funding is likely

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The views expressed here are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of the Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

- a Fissile material refers to "a nuclide that is capable of undergoing fission after capturing low-energy thermal (slow) neutrons."<sup>3</sup> Capturing a neutron displaces other neutrons from the capturing material, which leads to interaction with adjacent atoms, which in turn displaces other neutrons. This creates a sustained chain reaction that releases large amounts of energy. The three primary fissile materials are uranium-233, uranium-235, and plutonium-239. "Fissile Material." United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission, updated November 30, 2015.
- b Tests are required to ensure fidelity of the design and build. Such tests do not entail detonation of a full-scale nuclear weapon but rather components of the weapon such as the trigger.



not the greatest barrier to purchase of a weapon. The key barrier is availability of material and identification of a willing seller.

The extent of the global nuclear smuggling network was recently highlighted in media coverage of the five-year, joint Moldovan government and FBI probe into the “thriving nuclear black market that has emerged in an impoverished corner of Eastern Europe.”<sup>7</sup> In one instance a sample of uranium that could be used in an atomic bomb was seized.<sup>8</sup> Regrettably, as the coverage noted, most arrests occurred after only a small sample of nuclear material was exchanged; the larger stockpiles from which the samples were taken may remain for sale. The confluence of existing nuclear smuggling networks, the willingness of actors to sell material, even to extremists, and the Islamic State’s financial capabilities increase the likelihood that the group could acquire a nuclear device. However, notwithstanding its desire to possess nuclear weapons, the probability of the Islamic State obtaining and deploying a device remains low.

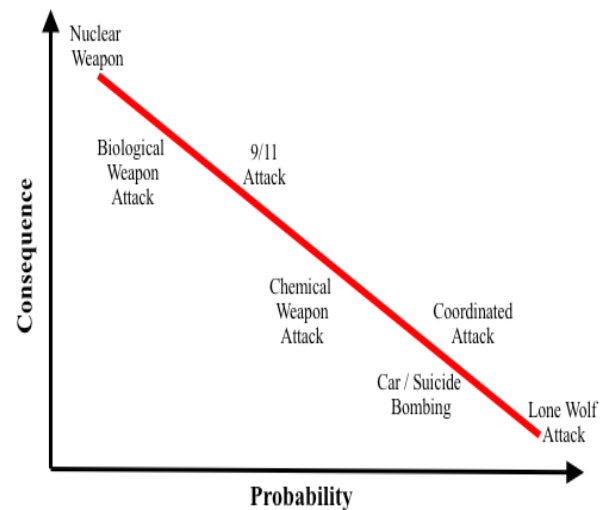
### Radiological

Radiological dispersion devices (RDDs) are likely the only radioactive weapons that the Islamic State could employ. Far more simplistic in design than nuclear weapons, these devices feature radioactive material intermixed with conventional explosives. Though they do not produce the mass-destruction characteristics of nuclear weapons such as shock waves, fires, and electro-magnetic pulses, RDDs create psychological impact on affected populations. They are most effective when detonated in densely populated areas; otherwise, the dispersion of radioactive material would do little more than prevent access to the area for a period of time. To attack the West the Islamic State would be required to export an RDD, drastically increasing the risk of detection through ISR and human intelligence.

The black market is one avenue for the Islamic State to obtain materials that could be used in a radiological device. In the cases investigated in Moldova, nuclear smugglers were purportedly ready to sell Cesium 137 to what they believed was a representative of the Islamic State.<sup>9</sup>

Within the area controlled by the Islamic State, there are two potential sources of radiological material: research facilities at universities and medical devices. Most of the material used in scientific research and medical diagnostics contain limited quantities of radioactive material. A material of concern is cobalt-60, which is used in medical devices and emits gamma radiation. In December 2013, a cargo truck carrying hospital equipment containing cobalt-60 was stolen from a gas station in Mexico.<sup>10</sup> The theft prompted concern among U.S. intelligence agencies that the material could be converted into a dirty bomb. Prolonged exposure to cobalt-60 can be deadly; the timeframe of lethality ranges from minutes to hours depending on the level of shielding.

Since RDDs are no more complicated than an improvised explosive device, the Islamic State certainly has the capability to develop them. There are two significant obstacles preventing the employment of such a device in the West. One, there is no evidence the Islamic State has gathered the necessary radiological material, and two, it lacks access to the target. To transport and move an RDD to a target increases the risk of detection similar to the limits of transporting a nuclear weapon. The detonation of an RDD would have a greater psychological impact on the affected population compared to the physical damage caused by the device. Subsequently, the risk of the Islamic State building an RDD is greater than that of a nuclear weapon, however the risk of actual deployment remains low.



*This figure illustrates the relationship between consequence and likelihood of various WMD attacks.*

### Biological

There is little doubt that the Islamic State would like to possess and use biological weapons. A laptop recovered by moderate Syrian rebels during a 2014 raid on the Islamic State stronghold of Idlib allegedly contained files instructing Islamic State on the preparation and use of biological weapons. The laptop also contained safety instructions for the development of microbes in order to protect Islamic State technicians from exposure.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the consistent reiteration of its desire to possess biological weapons, the Islamic State faces significant practical challenges. Like nuclear weapons, the development of biological weapons requires sophisticated personnel and technology that are not readily available in Iraq and Syria. The group could conceivably purchase and smuggle the materials needed to set up a biological weapons lab, however scale would become a significant obstacle given that effective production levels require a facility about the size of a large research lab with the corresponding infrastructure. The Islamic State would also have to contend with quality control issues as well. The power grid and generators in Iraq and Syria are not sufficiently reliable for the refrigerators and incubators needed to weaponize biological agents.<sup>c</sup>

In regard to the difficulties of biological weaponization, the 2014 Ebola crisis in Western Africa proves instructive. The spread of Ebola gave rise to concerns that the Islamic State would attempt to use

c Considering the Islamic State’s tremendous liquid assets, it could be possible for them to purchase the required generators and refrigerators. The process to grow and culture biological agents is neither short nor easy. The equipment required to culture large amounts of biological agents to be used in an attack would need to run for months and the culture areas must be completely sterile and within strict temperature ranges. Logistically, this is extremely difficult. Major research institutions in the West regularly struggle with maintaining sterile environments and contend with failing equipment that runs constantly. Without a reliable power grid, the Islamic State must then provide fuel to the generators, and although the group possesses vast amounts of oil, this does not mean it has the refinery capability to convert crude oil into gas. Furthermore, the equipment would need regular maintenance in a dry, dusty environment. Consequently, it would be an extreme logistical challenge for the Islamic State to maintain the proper environment to culture biological materials.

## **“Media reports indicate that the Islamic State is currently employing chemical weapons, specifically mustard agent. These reports also reveal, however, that the agent is crude and has not produced the mass effects typical of a state-run program.”**

Ebola-infected individuals as delivery systems for the virus. This non-traditional transfer mechanism could, in theory, infect people around the world. The reality is far different, however. When first infected with a virus, individuals have a low titer count (the concentration of virus in the blood). Once inside the host individual, the virus invades cells and replicates. This progressively leads to higher levels of virus in the body and a corresponding escalation of symptoms. At low levels, the individual is relatively non-contagious and appears normal. It is at the later stages of the infection that the individual is most contagious, but also the most sick and debilitated. Such highly infected host individuals are easily identifiable and often barely able to function, let alone able to execute a clandestine infection strategy. Diseases are not limited by national or regional borders. The introduction of a pathogen in a developed nation would be rapidly detected through bio-surveillance networks.

Biological weapons are very unlikely to be developed by the Islamic State as a mass casualty tool. Western medical countermeasures and response capabilities were able to handle the 2001 anthrax attack and quickly contain Ebola in the United States in 2014. All this suggests the impact of a deliberate biological attack by the Islamic State in the West would be extremely limited.

### **Chemical**

In 2013, the Syrian government deployed chemical munitions against rebels multiple times. International pressure following these attacks forced the Assad regime to join the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) and turn over all chemical weapon stockpiles. According to the OPCW, the Syrian government declared 1,308,021 kilograms<sup>11</sup> of both category 1 and 2 chemicals,<sup>d</sup> and the OPCW oversaw the destruction of 98.8% of those declared category 1 and 2 chemical weapons.

Various media reports indicate that the Islamic State is currently employing chemical weapons, specifically mustard agent.<sup>12</sup> These reports also reveal, however, that the agent is crude and has not produced the mass effects typical of a state-run program. There are also signs that the Islamic State “has developed at least a small-scale chemical weapons program, and may have manufactured low-quality blister agent or obtained chemical arms from undeclared or abandoned government [Syrian] stocks.”<sup>13</sup> The possibility that the chemical weapons used may have come from material at undeclared Syrian stockpiles has been documented in various media sources.<sup>14</sup> Examining samples of both the Syrian stockpile and the Islamic

State’s chemical weapons would reveal not only whether this was true, but also information about potency and persistence, which is the ability of the agent to linger in the environment before environmental factors cause its breakdown.<sup>e</sup>

One concern is that the Islamic State may take advantage of recruits with knowledge of previous state-run chemical weapons programs in Iraq and Syria. In January 2015, a coalition air strike killed Abu Malik, an Islamic State chemical weapons engineer who had worked at Saddam Hussein’s Muthana chemical weapon program before joining the predecessor group to the Islamic State in 2005. According to U.S. Central Command, “his past training and experience provided the terrorist group with expertise to pursue a chemical weapons capability,” and his death was “expected to temporarily degrade and disrupt the terrorist network and diminish ISIL’s ability to potentially produce and use chemical weapons.”<sup>15</sup>

With the Islamic State’s willingness to use chemical weapons, western nations should be concerned that the group or individuals acting on behalf of the group would attempt to deploy a poison gas device. If it did, the Islamic State would not be the first to attack on a western nation with chemical weapons. The Aum Shinrikyo released sarin in the Tokyo subway on March 20, 1995.

Before 9/11, al-Qa`ida began developing a device called *mubtakkar*, meaning “invention” in Arabic, to disseminate hydrogen cyanide and other toxic gases. According to journalist Ron Suskind, in 2003 al-Qa`ida operatives in Saudi Arabia plotted to use a poison gas device in the New York City subway system but aborted the plot after the group’s then-deputy, Ayman al-Zawahiri, decided not to “green light” it. The cell had planned to disperse quantities of hydrogen cyanide gas or another poisonous gas.<sup>16 f</sup> The simplicity of the design and the relative ease of obtaining some of the chemicals makes it a plot the Islamic State could mimic.

There are several constraints associated with developing chemical weapons. Chemicals such as hydrogen cyanide, sarin, and their precursors are highly corrosive and require storage in highly controlled environments. For example, high temperatures and humidity will affect both the chemical reactions used to make the warfare agents and their effectiveness. The corrosive nature of these agents also makes long-term storage and transportation over long distances very difficult without the appropriate containers and proper environment. When placed in a container, the agents will immediately begin to eat away at rubber seals and the container itself, making leaks inevitable. Such constraints make it likely that any agents developed by the Islamic State would most likely be deployed immediately after manufacture and within close proximity to the territory it holds.

While it cannot be ruled out that the Islamic State could deploy a rudimentary poison gas device against the West in the next several

d The Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons defines category 1 chemicals as munitions filled with schedule 1 chemical agents while category 2 chemicals are munitions filled with other toxic chemicals.

e If the mustard agent used in the recent attacks came from Syrian stockpiles, it could be confirmed by comparing the composition of components and impurities. A difference between the agents would indicate the inception and implementation of the Islamic State’s chemical weapon program. These impurities provide additional information about the potency, persistence, and absorption capabilities of the agents.

f Exposure to hydrogen cyanide gas at sufficiently high quantities is lethal within minutes. The LD50, or lethal dose to 50% of a population, is 2,000 parts per million, which corresponds to approximately 0.2% of the air as hydrogen cyanide. “Environmental & Health Effects: Cyanide Facts,” International Cyanide Management Code for the Fold Mining Industry.

years, the group would likely need to build the device near the location of the planned attack, requiring it to recruit or plant its own chemists in the West, not an easy feat.

Moving forward, the Islamic State will most likely continue to employ its limited chemical weapon munitions in both Syria and Iraq while seeking the capacity to expand its program to strike at major targets in the West.

## Conclusion

The Islamic State's potential use of WMD poses a greater psychological threat than physical threat to its enemies. While the Islamic State continues to seek and develop WMD, its progress will be constrained by reality. Despite seeking technical expertise and having large sums of liquid assets at its disposal, the Islamic State's logistical capabilities and support structure in Western nations is limited.

Containing the Islamic State needs to remain a priority, however, as further territorial expansion provides an opportunity to acquire new materials.

The Islamic State will continue to employ the simplest and most readily available WMD at their disposal—chemical weapons. The proliferation of this program remains a concern especially with the availability of toxic industrial chemicals that could be modified and dispersed in a chemical attack. While the effects of such devices would be limited to a small geographic area, the psychological impact to a Western nation, for example, would be significant. Current conditions in Syria and Iraq in conjunction with international ISR assets constantly monitoring the area reduce the possibility that the Islamic State will be able to develop any other WMD beyond chemical weapons. **CTC**

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# The Hotel Attacks and Militant Realignment in the Sahara-Sahel Region

By Andrew Lebovich

**The attack on Bamako's Radisson Blu Hotel in November 2015 shocked Mali and confirmed the reach of jihadist group al-Mourabitoun and the continued challenges to security in the region. The attack also marked the absorption of al-Mourabitoun into al-Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) amid tests to AQIM's position from fighters who have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State. AQIM and AQIM-linked groups have also expanded their operations across Mali and the wider region, a trend that will likely continue in 2016, as illustrated by the January 2016 attack on the Splendid Hotel and the Cappuccino Café—both popular with foreigners—in Burkina Faso's capital of Ouagadougou. This latest attack killed at least 29 people and wounded dozens more.**

**O**n November 20, 2015, two attackers stormed the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako, Mali. Armed with assault rifles and grenades, the men rampaged through the hotel, one of the most luxurious in the city and supposedly one of its safest. After hours of fighting and the intervention of Malian and French Special Forces,<sup>1</sup> the two gunmen lay dead and unconfirmed rumors spread that other shooters may have escaped.<sup>2</sup> In the end, the two terrorists killed 19 people in the hotel, including several Malian security guards, a Senegalese businessman, six Russian airline employees, an American health worker, three Chinese railroad executives, and a Belgian parliamentarian.

The jihadist group al-Mourabitoun claimed responsibility for the attacks on Twitter and in communiqués sent to Al Jazeera, published online, and sent to the Mauritanian newspaper *al-Akhbar*.<sup>3</sup> Al-Mourabitoun, led by the al-Qa'ida-linked commander Mokhtar Belmokhtar and created in 2013 after Belmokhtar's departure from AQIM and the French military intervention in Mali in January 2013, merged the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa

(MUJAO) and two of Belmokhtar's brigades.<sup>a</sup>

Two days later, another Malian militant group, Front de Libération de Masina (FLM), claimed credit for the attack, saying it was carried out in collaboration with the Malian Tuareg-led jihadist group Ansar al-Din.<sup>4</sup> But AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdel (Abu Musab Abdelwadoud) released a video claiming credit for the attack and announcing al-Mourabitoun's allegiance to AQIM.<sup>5</sup> The group also released photos of the two attackers, and Mali's chief prosecutor later confirmed that a slip of paper found in the pockets of one of the attackers indicated that the attack was conducted by al-Mourabitoun.<sup>b</sup> This month saw the same group claim responsibility for an attack on a hotel and café in Ouagadougou which killed at least 29.

This article will provide an initial assessment of the information available about the attacks as well as the context and significance of the militant realignments in the Sahel with a particular focus on the possible influence of the Islamic State on these changes. It will also examine how the militant landscape in the region may evolve in 2016.

## Targeting and Significance

The luxury Radisson Blu sits in one of Bamako's newer neighborhoods, ACI 2000, and until the attack, it was considered one of the city's safer hotels.<sup>c</sup> However, the two attackers were able to overcome security measures rather easily. According to witnesses, the attack began in front of the hotel just before 7:00 AM when the men pulled weapons and grenades from suitcases and killed sever-

a Belmokhtar's Katibat al-Mulathimeen (Brigade of the Veiled Ones) and al-Muwakoune bi-Dima (Those who Sign in Blood) joined MUJAO, which broke off from AQIM in October 2011. The group reportedly formed following anger among some Sahran AQIM cadres—especially Mauritians—that the leadership was too Algerian. MUJAO leaders also were said to have condemned AQIM for not aggressively pursuing jihad. The group recruited Sahelian and West African fighters, although its early focus was on kidnapping for ransom and targeting the Algerian government and security services. During the occupation of northern Mali in 2012, MUJAO worked in some cases alongside AQIM and AQIM commanders such as Belmokhtar, although he may have helped form MUJAO. MUJAO was largely responsible for governing the city of Gao, where the group took a hard line in implementing sharia. On MUJAO's history and formation, see Mohammed Mahmoud Abu al-Ma'ali, "Al-Qaeda and its Allies in the Sahel and the Sahara," Al Jazeera Center for Studies, May 01, 2012; also see Andrew Lebovich, "Of Mergers, MUJAO, and Mokhtar Belmokhtar," *Al-Wasat*, August 22, 2013.

b The paper contained a request for the release of al-Mourabitoun prisoners held in Mauritania and Niger, in keeping with initial reports that the attackers demanded the liberation of unspecified prisoners. "Enlèvement d'une Suisse au Mali: la piste jihadiste se précise," *Agence France Presse*, January 10, 2015; Tiemoko Diallo and Emma Farge, "Mali says note links al Qaeda splinter group to hotel siege," *Reuters*, January 10, 2015.

c The hotel is one of the few in the city authorized and recommended to house employees of the UN Mission in Mali, MINUSMA.

al guards before storming into the lobby and adjacent restaurant where hotel patrons were sitting down to breakfast. The gunmen then proceeded to search the hotel's kitchens and front-of-house areas, reportedly firing into elevators where guests sought shelter, before moving from floor to floor looking for other guests. The nature of the attack itself also remains somewhat unclear. Associated Press reporter Baba Ahmed reported that the gunmen shot at anyone in sight while initial accounts from witnesses suggested that some hotel guests were released after demonstrating some knowledge of Islam.<sup>d</sup> Malian and French special operations forces finally killed the men on the hotel's third floor, more than nine hours after the assault began.<sup>e</sup>

Immediately after the attack, the Malian rebel group Coordination des Mouvements de l'Azawad (CMA) condemned the incident as an attempt to undermine Mali's fragile peace process. An Algerian delegation staying at the hotel in advance of planned meetings of the Algerian-led Comité de Suivi de l'Accord d'Alger (CSA) was able to escape unharmed, though the circumstances remain unclear.<sup>7</sup> Other accounts suggest that the gunmen specifically searched for Air France employees staying at the hotel.<sup>8</sup> Eyewitness accounts can be unreliable,<sup>9</sup> and it remains difficult to confirm the veracity of one account or the other. However, in choosing one of Bamako's best-known hotels, and one that was popular with foreign elites, it should be assumed that the planners sought to target foreigners. This did not stop them, of course, from accepting the death of Muslims in the attack; AQIM and al-Mourabitoun have not shied away from killing Muslims in the past in Mali or elsewhere. However, the choice of target in this case was unmistakably foreigners or those associated with foreign governments—like the meeting of the CSA. The reported separation of Muslims from non-Muslims was reminiscent of previous attacks by al-Qa`ida-affiliated groups, including Mokhtar Belmokhtar's January 2013 attack on the gas facility at In Amenas, Algeria.<sup>10</sup> And regardless of the target, some jihadist supporters certainly received a message from the Bamako attack, comparing it favorably to the Islamic State-directed assaults in Paris just one week earlier that killed 130 people.<sup>11</sup>

In many ways, the attack on the Splendid Hotel this January followed a similar pattern while also demonstrating evolutions in tactics as well as AQIM and al-Mourabitoun's media approach. Burkina Faso and French authorities are still trying to understand the attack, and initial conclusions drawn after the attack may change as further investigations take place. What is known is that around 7:30 PM on January 15, gunmen opened fire inside the Cappuccino Café, reportedly executing "white" patrons, although a number of Burkina Faso citizens also died in the attacks. Simultaneously, the attackers or another group of gunmen (the number of attackers

remains unknown)<sup>12</sup> reportedly set off explosives in cars parked in front of the hotel before storming inside to the hotel's lobby and restaurant, which was filled with Friday evening diners.<sup>13</sup> Other reports indicated that the attackers set off some sort of explosives inside the hotel, presumably in order to slow efforts to retake the site.<sup>14</sup>

It took a combination of Burkinabé, French, and American forces nearly 15 hours to end the siege. The attackers were eventually killed early in the morning in front of an adjacent restaurant. During this time, AQIM released two different statements. One was a graphic incorporating pictures from the attack, and the other was a clip from an audio "interview" between an AQIM member and the attackers while the assault was still underway. AQIM's al-Andalus media followed these statements with a formal claim of responsibility just two days later, entitled "When Muslim Africa Avenges its Victims."<sup>15</sup> These statements all focused on the international community and particularly France's role in the Sahara and Sahel, condemning the actions of the "Crusaders" and their servants. In the official claim, AQIM also says the attack was vengeance for defaming the Prophet Muhammad and that it targeted places that were the centers for "war against Islam and the theft of the riches of Africa." This is no doubt a reference to the Splendid Hotel's use not just by NGOs and business people, but also sometimes by soldiers taking part in Operation Barkhane, France's regional counterterrorism mission that succeeded Operation Serval.<sup>16</sup> More broadly the comment may be a reference to the important role Burkina Faso has played for several years as a basing point for French Special Operations Forces (COS) taking part in Operation Sabre,<sup>17</sup> the official name for the COS taskforce in the Sahel.

The statement also made reference to support for jihadis fighting in Syria and Iraq, and the statement alluded to vengeance for crimes committed against Muslims in Central Africa, Mali, and elsewhere in the world. There are no reports of fighters specifically sparing Muslims from violence. The attack killed at least eight Burkinabé, which prompted an immediate backlash from Muslim as well as non-Muslim Burkinabé in the famously tolerant country.

The attack also comes at a fragile political moment not long after Burkina Faso installed its first freely-elected president since 1987, which followed more than a year of political turmoil that included a coup and an attempted coup and the dissolution of the elite Régiment de la Sécurité Présidentielle (RSP).<sup>18</sup>

## The Once and Future AQIM?

The reconciliation between AQIM and al-Mourabitoun came about amid competition from a growing Islamic State presence in North Africa and the Sahara/Sahel region, a reorientation of jihadist groups in the aftermath of French military operations in the region, and the longstanding and complex relations between various Algerian jihadist factions. Belmokhtar was among the first Algerian militants to invest heavily in the Sahara, where he formed important marriage, social, and business ties with local populations starting in the late 1990s.<sup>19</sup> These connections and his knowledge of the Sahara helped Belmokhtar maintain a strong degree of independence from the central leadership of the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC in French), which officially became AQIM in early 2007.<sup>20</sup> This independence and refusal to follow orders led to significant tension during the occupation of northern Mali by Tuareg rebels and then increasingly by jihadist forces in 2012. These tensions, over leadership, but also the ethnic compo-

d Some reports indicated that some hostages were asked to recite the Shahaada, the Muslim profession of faith, while others reported that hostages were released if they could read a selection from the Quran. Dionne Searcey and Adam Nossiter, "Deadly Siege Ends After Assault on Hotel in Mali," *New York Times*, November 20, 2015; "Attaques de Bamako: libération d'otages qui savent lire le Coran," *Al-Akhbar* (Mauritania), November 20, 2015.

e The Algerian delegation reportedly included a high-ranking official in the country's intelligence service, the Direction du Renseignement et de la Sécurité. However, there is no confirmation that initial reports that the delegation was held hostage are true. See "Mali: retour sur l'attaque de l'hôtel Radisson de Bamako," *Jeune Afrique*, November 20, 2015; also see Abdou Semmar, "Attaque terroriste de Bamako/Qui était ce haut responsable du DRS retenu en otage?" *Algérie-Focus*, November 20, 2015.

sition and geographic dispersal of jihadist groups, had already led in part to the creation of MUJAO in 2011.<sup>21</sup> They came to a head in October and November 2012 when Belmokhtar was expelled from AQIM and took much of his Katibat al-Mulathimeen with him.<sup>22</sup> During this time, however, Belmokhtar repeatedly affirmed his allegiance to al-Qa`ida's central command and its leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, possibly vying for recognition that would never come.<sup>23</sup>

Since the Islamic State proclaimed its so-called caliphate in June 2014, it has expanded in both symbolic and real terms in North and West Africa.<sup>24</sup> The group's biggest successes have come in Libya where, according to a UN report, it may have between 2,000 and 3,000 fighters,<sup>25</sup> and in Nigeria following the acceptance of Boko Haram as the Islamic State's representative in West Africa.<sup>26</sup> It is unclear, though, exactly how much control the Islamic State's central leadership exercises over the Nigerian branch now known as the Islamic State's West Africa Province. Regardless, the Islamic State's expansion remains contested and uneven in much of North Africa and the Sahel.

In Algeria, several small groups of fighters largely composed of defectors from AQIM have pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, notably the group referred to as Jund al-Khilafa (Soldiers of the Caliphate) as well as groups in the *wilayat* of Constantine and Skikda, both in eastern Algeria.<sup>27</sup> Although Jund al-Khilafa gained public attention with the beheading of French hiker Hervé Gourdel in May 2014, the Algerian army has ruthlessly hunted down the fighters and reportedly killed a large number of them, including the group's first emir Abdelmalek Gouri and at least one subsequent leader after Gouri's death.<sup>28</sup> And while the Islamic State has claimed responsibility for two IED attacks that wounded Algerian soldiers in the hills near Constantine,<sup>29</sup> at the moment these units remain small and relatively inactive according to Western diplomats and local specialists.<sup>30</sup> In Tunisia, meanwhile, despite the large number of Islamic State fighters from the country, AQIM has maintained a foothold there through Katibat Oqba Ibn Nafi, located primarily in the Jebel Chaambi along the border with Algeria. This group may have been involved in the deadly attack on the Bardo Museum in Tunis in March 2015 that killed 22 people, not the Islamic State, which claimed the attack. The attack has also been attributed to Ansar al-Sharia in Tunisia, some of whose fighters are linked to the Islamic State and others to AQIM or other groups.<sup>31</sup>

However, developments in Libya and Mali appear to have catalyzed the reunion between AQIM and Belmokhtar's fighters. In both countries, al-Qa`ida-aligned groups are working to stave off competition from the Islamic State. Although the Islamic State has expanded rapidly in Libya, particularly in the country's eastern cities of Derna and Benghazi as well as in the central town of Sirte, this push is contested. In addition to facing threats from troops under the command of General Khalifa Haftar, various Libyan cities such as Ajdabiya have seen fierce fighting between Islamic State fighters and a complex array of Islamist and jihadist groups. These include the Fajr Libya coalition and groups such as the Ajdabiyah Shura Council (ASC) and the Majlis Shura al-Mujahideen Darnah. Indeed, the U.S. airstrike that targeted Belmokhtar in Ajdabiya in June 2015 reportedly occurred when he was in the city to negotiate a common front against the Islamic State. These talks were part of ongoing discussions between AQIM's leadership and Belmokhtar in the spring and summer of 2015 about whether to reunify in the face of Islamic State expansion.<sup>32</sup>

These negotiations happened against a backdrop of disagree-

ment within al-Mourabitoun. In May 2015, and without consulting Belmokhtar, Adnan Abu Walid al-Sahraoui, the titular head of al-Mourabitoun, announced to *al-Akhbar* that the umbrella group to which Belmokhtar belonged had pledged allegiance to Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Forced into making an unusual public statement, Belmokhtar quickly countered with a statement criticizing al-Sahraoui and stating that the *bay`a* (allegiance) did not reflect a decision of al-Mourabitoun's *shura* (guiding council).<sup>33</sup> In August, Belmokhtar effectively wrested back control of al-Mourabitoun after the group released a statement appointing Belmokhtar as the group's emir, formalizing a direct leadership role that he had studiously avoided since the group's formation in August 2013.<sup>34</sup> Questions remain, however, about Belmokhtar's status and even possible death after the airstrike in Ajdabiya.<sup>f</sup>

The divisions that emerged in al-Mourabitoun were a long time coming. The leadership arrangements made before the group's creation meant that it was a compromise between Belmokhtar<sup>35</sup> and Ahmed Ould Amer (also known as Ahmed al-Tilemsi), the erstwhile military commander of MUJAO who had become its paramount figure by the time al-Mourabitoun was founded. To avoid confrontation, Belmokhtar and al-Tilemsi did not seek to take over leadership of the umbrella group. According to Mauritanian journalist and researcher Mohamed Mahmoud Abu al-Ma`ali, the two men agreed not to lead al-Mourabitoun, leaving the command instead to an Egyptian known as Abu Bakr al-Masri.<sup>g</sup> But al-Sahraoui, one of the senior leaders in MUJAO, and some other senior figures initially refused to pledge allegiance to al-Masri, although al-Sahraoui later reversed his position.

When al-Masri was killed in April 2014, al-Tilemsi was appointed emir, before he was killed by French forces in northern Mali in December 2014, leaving another leadership void.<sup>h</sup> Still, according to al-Ma`ali, with Belmokhtar and some members of the group's *majlis al-shura* away from northern Mali, al-Sahraoui at this point became al-Mourabitoun's new emir, a move Belmokhtar and his fighters purportedly viewed as illegitimate.<sup>36</sup>

This split reportedly exacerbated lingering personal and ideological differences between al-Sahraoui's and Belmokhtar's fac-

f Although U.S. officials said publicly only that Belmokhtar was targeted in the airstrike, anonymous reports at the time of the airstrike strongly suggested that he had been killed, and the Tobruk-based Libyan government announced that he had been killed as well. Geoff D. Porter, an expert on security and politics in North Africa, has stated unequivocally that Belmokhtar was killed in the airstrike. However, French officials have said both publicly and privately that they either believe Belmokhtar is alive or cannot confirm his death, and AQIM officially denied his death soon after the airstrike. Still, it is interesting to note that the announcements from al-Mourabitoun and AQIM on their reunion do not mention Belmokhtar, nor does a recent interview with AQIM Saharan emir Yahya Abou El Hammam. Geoff D. Porter, "NARCO Analysis: What Paris Means for the Maghreb," North Africa Risk Consulting Inc., November 18, 2015; Thomas Joscelyn, "Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb says Mokhtar Belmokhtar is 'alive and well,'" Long War Journal, June 19, 2015; "Hotél Radisson au Mali: Mokhtar Belmokhtar 'sans doute à l'origine de l'attentat' (Le Drian)," *Le Figaro*, November 20, 2015; conversations with French diplomatic and defense officials, Paris, December 2015.

g Also referred to as al-Muhajir in reference to his origins outside of the region.

h It is not clear if al-Tilemsi took over with Belmokhtar's blessing or took advantage of Belmokhtar's travels outside of northern Mali to take over the top position.



tions, with al-Sahraoui growing closer to the Islamic State even as Belmokhtar and Droukdel were in negotiations to reunify their groups. These differences led to al-Sahraoui's public *bay`a* to al-Baghdadi in May 2015.

So far, the Islamic State has not publicly recognized or accepted the pledge. The split reportedly led to deadly fighting between the different factions in June 2015 that may have left al-Sahraoui wounded, although very little confirmed information has emerged about these clashes.<sup>37</sup>

In this context, the realignment of AQIM and al-Mourabitoun appears related to the rise of the Islamic State and a need to stave off Islamic State advances and avoid defections. This is particularly important given the important losses that al-Mourabitoun has faced since its formation, including the deaths of al-Masri and Ould Amer in combat with French forces.<sup>38</sup>

For some observers, this need for unity in the face of external challenges has appeared more urgent since September. A series of AQIM videos focused on the Sahara and featuring AQIM's Katibat al-Furqan commander Abderrahman al-Liby<sup>39</sup> appear to use Islamic State *anasheed* (religious chants) as well as themes and filming techniques common in Islamic State videos.<sup>i</sup> Perhaps in response to these concerns, AQIM's Saharan emir Yahya Abu el-Hammam, in his first interview since the French intervention in Mali, told *Al-Akhbar* that AQIM's *ulema* had judged the Islamic State to be illegitimate. He added that it was not obligatory for Muslims to give *bay`a* to the Islamic State. As for al-Sahraoui, el-Hammam told the newspaper that AQIM was in contact with him and that he hoped God would guide al-Sahraoui in the right direction, suggesting that he had gone astray in giving his support to al-Baghdadi.<sup>40</sup> In the interview el-Hammam also confirmed the new relationship with al-Mourabitoun, saying that the two groups had formed a *shura* to coordinate their activities.<sup>41</sup>

At the moment, however, open defections among AQIM networks both in North Africa and the Sahara-Sahel region remain limited, a fact that could be due to AQIM's efforts to exert control over its networks and component parts. Additionally, the lack of defections could be due in part to the fact that AQIM and AQIM-linked groups have recent governing experience, after implementing their interpretation of the *sharia* over much of northern Mali in 2012 and thus having instituted a form of Islamic governance before the proclamation of the Islamic State under al-Baghdadi.<sup>42</sup>

### The Islamic State, al-Qa`ida, and the "Glocal"

Despite the importance of Islamic State and jihadist competition in fueling group activity, mergers, and divisions in Africa, this international context is insufficient to explain the evolution and permutation of jihadist violence in the Sahel. Local factors and grievances, as scholars such as Caitriona Dowd have argued, play an important

role in fueling violence.<sup>43</sup> In the Sahara and Sahel, however, it is best to understand these groups as "glocal"<sup>44</sup>—deeply embedded in local networks while also operating rhetorically and physically against international targets and engaging with issues of international interest.

Immediately following the Bamako attack, a number of observers, particularly journalists, drew a link to the Paris attacks the week before and the jostling between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State. According to these theories,<sup>45</sup> the Bamako attack allowed al-Qa`ida affiliates to show that they could also strike international targets and acquire international attention. Although this competition might have been a factor, the Bamako attack and subsequent media productions, in fact, demonstrate the interconnectedness of local, regional, and international issues in shaping jihadist violence.

For instance, in the AQIM message announcing the joining of al-Mourabitoun, Droukdel inveighed against France, while both his statement and al-Mourabitoun's statement about joining AQIM urged unity against the "Crusaders," echoing common messages of jihadist propaganda. And the choice of the Radisson Blu, a symbol of foreign presence in Bamako, was clearly meant to signal to the broader world that the attack was meant to target foreigners, even despite the hotel's possible links to the peace process in Mali. Yet the attackers, as announced by al-Mourabitoun and later confirmed in a photo released by al-Mourabitoun via AQIM media outlets, were two young Fulani men who appear to have been from Mali.<sup>j</sup> This shows not just the extent of local recruitment in which jihadist groups active in the Sahara-Sahel region have engaged for years, but also a distinct desire to demonstrate and affirm these local ties as part of a regionally and internationally connected jihadist group.

The Bamako attack also demonstrates how militancy in Mali has evolved after the French intervention in 2013 and, in particular, how it has spread into central and southern Mali. This spread has been spearheaded by some of the same jihadist actors who helped the GSPC and AQIM entrench themselves in the Sahel. This includes Belmokhtar, whose fighters conducted multiple high-profile attacks in Bamako before the Radisson Blu,<sup>k</sup> the AQIM-aligned

j In the release, the two are identified as Abdul Hakim and Mu'adh al-Fulani, without reference to their place of origin. However, in the first statement to *al-Akhbar* naming the attackers, an unidentified al-Mourabitoun member referred to them by the name al-Ansari, which suggests local origin. See "Seules deux personnes ont mené la prise d'otages à Bamako (Al-Mourabitoune)," *Al-Akhbar*, November 22, 2015; In French, members of the Fulani ethno-linguistic group are generally identified as Peul or Peulh. This group is believed to comprise as many as 30 million people across West and Central Africa. Although the Peul are known as nomadic herders, they in fact comprise a heterogeneous group whose ranks included traders and sedentary populations that for centuries have developed and cultivated a reputation for scholarship, including Islamic scholarship. See for instance Roman Loimeier, *Muslim Societies in Africa: A Historical Anthropology* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013) pp. 4-5.

k These include the March attack on the popular bar and restaurant La Terrace in Bamako's Hippodrome neighborhood as well as shootings at UN vehicles and property in the city. Al-Mourabitoun also claimed responsibility for the August 2015 attack on the Byblos Hotel in Sévaré, which killed 13 people, including four Malian soldiers and five MINUSMA contractors. The FLM was believed to be responsible for the Sévaré attack, though it appears instead that the operation involved fighters linked to both groups in a fluid arrangement. See Rémi Carayol, "Mali: Keita et Koufa, l'inquiétant duo terroriste du sud," *Jeune Afrique*, December 3, 2015; also see Baba Ahmed and Claire Rainfroy, "Mali: Ce qu'on sait de l'attaque de Sévaré," *Jeune Afrique*, August 10, 2015.

i See <https://twitter.com/RomainCaillet/status/684852159830224896>; while these propaganda cues may be an attempt at intimating support to the Islamic State in advance of an eventual pledge of allegiance, they may also show an attempt to adopt the trappings of a successful propaganda campaign. Additionally, it is difficult to imagine a video featuring open imitation of Islamic State propaganda passing unnoticed by AQIM's other leaders. After all, the video was released through AQIM's official media foundation, *al-Andalus*, and was tweeted from several prominent AQIM-linked Twitter accounts. This could indicate an impending large-scale defection from AQIM, but such official approval of these messages could just as easily indicate a conscious decision to shift the organization's media focus.

Tuareg jihadist leader and longtime Malian militant and political actor Iyad Ag Ghali, and a number of close allies of the two involved in the occupation of northern Mali, such as the FLM's reported leader Amadou Kouffa and a former lieutenant Souleymane Keïta.<sup>46</sup> In his interview with *al-Akhbar*, el-Hammam confirmed that these groups all maintain ties and coordinate with each other in staging attacks throughout Mali.<sup>47</sup>

This combination of local, regional, and international was also echoed in a video released by AQIM in early January 2016. In one segment, the video shows the intervention of AQIM fighters and particularly Talha al-Liby in a communal meeting in the village of Boudjbeha north of Timbuktu.<sup>48</sup> In the scene, in which al-Liby greets attendees warmly and speaks openly, he condemns France and its actions and policies in northern Mali, warning attendees not to aid France, while also stating that AQIM's conflict is with France, not with local populations. This, then, is an ostensibly international discourse delivered by a longtime militant with family ties to Timbuktu and local Arab populations known to the community for his role with the city's Islamic Police during the 2012 jihadist occupation.<sup>49</sup> The video also featured a lengthy speech condemning France from a militant identified as Abu Baseer al-Bumbari, whose name clearly suggests that he is of Bambara and southern Malian origin.<sup>50</sup>

El-Hammam's interview may have also presaged the Ouagadougou attack. In it, he spoke directly to the states of the region, saying that AQIM would remain neutral to states that did not attack it and would target states that did. During and after the attack, AQIM also emphasized very directly its own regional and local roots. While Burkinabé officials claimed they killed four attackers, AQIM identified three in its official announcement along with photos of the fighters. The three men, all apparently young, were identified as Abu Mohammed al-Buqali al-Ansari, al-Bitar al-Ansari,

and Ahmed al-Fulani al-Ansari. The statement clearly identifies them as African Muslims and "knights of Azawad," and although the statement itself does not state their exact place of birth, the name "al-Ansari" and the Azawad appellation indicates implies that like the Radisson attackers, they are from the region and most likely from northern Mali.<sup>51</sup> *Al-Akhbar* also writes that the attackers were from Mali, though this cannot be confirmed independently at the time of this writing.<sup>52</sup> In addition to involving attackers native to the Sahel, they were certainly familiar with the area and routes into Burkina Faso where they could pass undetected or receive local help; the attackers reportedly arrived in Ouagadougou in 4x4s with Niger license plates, and prayed in the mosque behind the Splendid Hotel in the hours before the attack.<sup>53</sup>

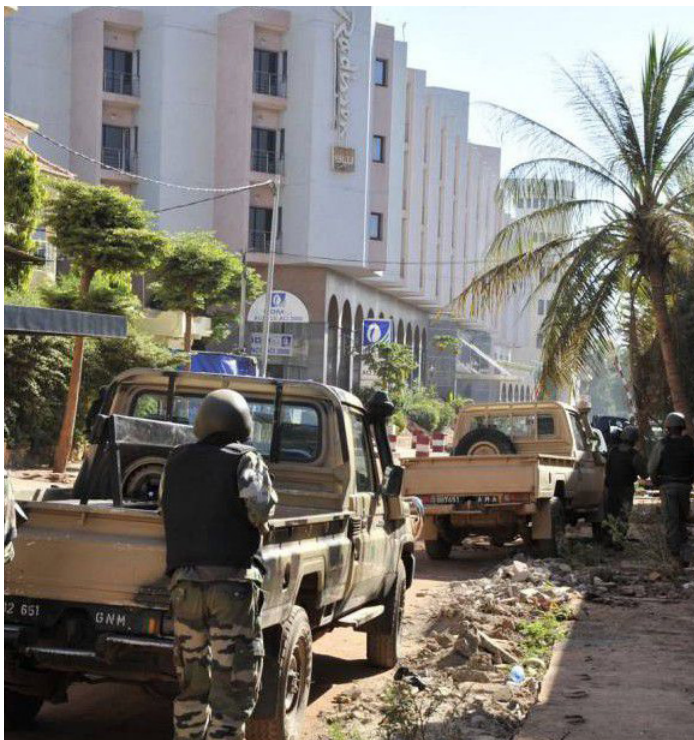
The attack is also notable for the use again of a fighter identified as Fulani, a 30 million strong ethnic and linguistic group spread across the Sahel and West Africa. This shows again the strength of AQIM recruitment in the Sahel. There has been regional concern about the recruitment of Fulani populations to jihadist groups like MUJAO and al-Mourabitoun that have been able to exploit grievances. Fulani populations have increasingly sought to protect themselves in conflicts with rival communities over water access and grazing rights, while they have also suffered discrimination in some areas and repression, particularly in the Central African Republic and Mali.<sup>54</sup>

## Looking Ahead

Moving into 2016, the jihadist environment in Mali and the broader Sahara-Sahel region remains in flux even as certain trends seem likely to continue. For several years, even as these groups have maintained a strong presence of North Africans from non-Saharan regions in their ranks, the Sahara-Sahel region's jihadist groups have increasingly recruited and promoted fighters and commanders from across the region itself. Despite the toll exacted on these groups by Operation Serval and Operation Barkhane, which in December 2015 claimed to have killed a prominent group of al-Mourabitoun fighters near Ménaka in Mali,<sup>55</sup> their operations have not only increased in the last year in northern Mali but also spread increasingly to central and southern Mali.

This trend toward increased attacks across the country is likely to continue while French counterterrorism forces remain spread across the region, especially as Mali's government struggles both to forge a peace deal with largely Tuareg and Arab rebel groups and reassert its authority over the country. Border regions, especially those with Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, will also likely see more attacks against their security forces and symbols of state authority. These attacks are related to the more "international" attacks of a group like AQIM; indeed, on the same day as the Ouagadougou attack, AQIM claimed credit for kidnapping an Australian couple in northern Burkina Faso.<sup>56</sup> The challenges of security in cities like Bamako and Ouagadougou and the relatively low cost of operations there also make further attacks in regional cities and capitals against foreign targets a significant threat.

It is also likely that competition between the Islamic State and al-Qa`ida-linked groups will continue. Although AQIM has succeeded for the moment in blunting large-scale defections to the Islamic State, this may change in the coming year, especially if al-Baghdadi chooses to recognize al-Sahraoui's *bay`a*. This competition could also increase if the continued fighting in Libya pushes Islamic State fighters south in search of refuge and more welcoming



*Malian soldiers stand watch outside the Radisson Blu hotel in Bamako.*

operating terrain.

What is clear is that the local security and political dynamics in Mali and beyond will remain an important factor in shaping the interaction between different transnational jihadi groups. The Sahara-Sahel region is not the “ungoverned space” that lingers in

romantic imagination. It is, however, a contested space where the issues of migration, movement, and competition for resources (both licit and illicit), space, and political position are all playing out. And in 2016 these issues will be as important to understand as the jostling between al-Qa`ida and the Islamic State. **CTC**

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# The Jakarta Attack and the Islamic State Threat to Indonesia

By Kirsten E. Schulze

**The January 14 attack in Jakarta shows the growing military capacity of Islamic State supporters in Indonesia. It also reveals the important role played by key Indonesians in Syria as a link to militant jihadis back home providing direction, possible finance and, above all, tapping into local grievances over the actions of the Indonesian state and police. Indonesia will continue to face a threat from the Islamic State in 2016 and beyond and may suffer from further attacks, but it is highly unlikely that the group will succeed in establishing a *wilayat* on Indonesian territory in any meaningful way.**

On January 14, multiple explosions and gunfire rocked the Indonesian capital, Jakarta. The attack took place in the Thamrin district in the city center, targeting a Starbucks café near Sarinah Mall and the traffic police post in front of it. According to the Indonesian police, eight people were killed, including four of the attackers, three Indonesian civilians and one foreigner of Canadian nationality. Another 25 were wounded, including five police officers and one foreigner of Dutch nationality. The Islamic State claimed responsibility, stating that “soldiers of the Caliphate” had “targeted a gathering of the citizens of the Crusader alliance” and “those charged with protecting them” in order to let “them know that there is no safety for them in the lands of the Muslims.”<sup>1</sup> The four attackers who were killed have since been identified as Afif (alias Sunakim), Dian Joni Kurniadi, M. Ali, and Ahmad Muhazan bin Saron.<sup>2</sup> Sunakim had been in prison for involvement in the 2010 Aceh training camp.<sup>3</sup> As of January 18, Indonesian police counterterrorism Detachment 88 (Densus 88) had arrested 18 persons suspected of having aided the attackers in six cities across Indonesia.<sup>4</sup>

This attack, which emulated the marauding *modus operandi* of the Paris attacks in November 2015, was the first in Jakarta since the 2009 bombings of the JW Marriott and Ritz-Carlton hotels. It was not, however, wholly unexpected as it was preceded by heightened security since November following the combined impact of the Paris attacks, the release of a video on social media calling for attacks on Jakarta police headquarters and the presidential palace,<sup>5</sup> and a blog run by an Indonesian in Syria named Bahrin Naim had urged “his Indonesian audience to study the planning, targeting,

timing, coordination, security, and courage of the Paris teams.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, information obtained in late 2015 indicated that the Islamic State was planning “a concert” in Indonesia, which was interpreted as meaning an attack.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, Indonesian police foiled a planned suicide bomb attack on New Year’s celebrations in Jakarta, resulting in the arrest of six alleged members of the Islamic State and the discovery of bomb-making materials as well as a black Islamist flag.<sup>8</sup>

Since the outbreak of the Syria conflict in 2011, Densus 88 has been closely watching its impact on local jihadi circles, noting both the reignition of the jihadi fervor as well as the departure of a small but steady stream of Indonesians to join Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar Ash-Sham, and the Islamic State. The verified number of Indonesians in Syria according to Densus 88 was 166 in August 2015.<sup>9</sup> However, Indonesia’s national intelligence agency, BIN, estimates that the number is around 500 with most Indonesians having joined the Islamic State. Security Minister Luhut Panjaitan has even placed the number of Indonesians in Syria as high as 800.<sup>10</sup>

Like other foreign fighters, Indonesians have been motivated by the desire to defend Syrian Muslims from the brutality of the Assad regime, the belief that the Syria conflict signalled the countdown to the final battle between good and evil as prophesied in Islamic eschatology,<sup>11</sup> and the need to fulfill what many see as the obligation of jihad, which even takes precedence over the hajj pilgrimage.<sup>12</sup> Following the declaration of the so-called caliphate in June 2014, whole families started to go to Syria in order to live in what they viewed as the true Islamic state.<sup>13</sup>

The Syria conflict has provided an opportunity for Indonesian Islamist organizations to gain training and combat experience. This has been particularly important with the disappearance of local arenas of jihad with the end of the Ambon conflict in 2003 and the Poso conflict in 2007. After the latter, Jemaah Islamiyya, which was responsible for the 2002 Bali bombings and a string of other high profile attacks, decided to move away from militant jihad in Indonesia until the country’s Muslims were ready for an Islamic state. Jemaah Islamiyya consequently refocused its activities on *dawa* (outreach) and education activities as well as rebuilding its network, which had been severely damaged by Indonesian counterterrorism operations since 2002.<sup>14</sup> In this context hardliners from within the ranks of Jemaah Islamiyya regrouped alongside hardliners from other jihadi organizations to establish new groups and keep the jihad going.<sup>15</sup> These hardliners included the Noordin Top group responsible for the 2009 hotel bombings in Jakarta.<sup>16</sup> The most important new groups to emerge were Jamaah Ansharu Tauhid (JAT) under the leadership of former Jemaah Islamiyya emir Abu Bakar Ba’syir and Mujahedin East Indonesia (MIT) which, under the leadership of Santoso, has waged a jihad against the Indonesian police in the Poso area since 2011.

The Syria conflict has allowed Jemaah Islamiyya to increase its military capacity outside Indonesia, similar to the experience

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it gained in Afghanistan between 1985 and 1993, as well as reestablishing its jihadi credentials after moving away from jihad in Indonesia. It is important to note, however, that the number of Jemaah Islamiyya volunteers going to Syria has been small, that the selection process has been highly secretive and limited to existing members only, and that they have joined al-Qa`ida-affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra rather than the Islamic State whose ideology they contest and whose caliphate they do not recognize as valid.<sup>17</sup>

The number of Indonesian fighters joining the Islamic State has been considerably larger and more eclectic. They have come from a pro-Islamic State network composed of the Tawhid wal Jihad group led by Aman Abdurrahman, Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid, and Mujahedin East Indonesia (MIT) as well as Mujahedin West Indonesia (MIB), the Bima group, NII Banten also known as Ring Banten, Laskar Jundullah,<sup>18</sup> the Islamic Sharia Activists Forum or Forum Aktivis Syariat Islam (FAKSI),<sup>19</sup> and the Student Movement for Islamic Sharia or Gerakan Mahasiswa Untuk Syariat Islam (Gema Salam).<sup>20</sup>

At the heart of this network is Indonesian cleric Aman Abdurrahman, who subscribes to the highly sectarian takfiri-jihadi ideas of Islamic State founder Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his mentor Abu Muhamad al-Maqdisi.<sup>21</sup> It is one of Abdurrahman's men in Syria, Bahrn Naim, who, according to Indonesian national police chief General Badrodin Haiti is believed to have "masterminded" the January 14 attack in Jakarta.<sup>22</sup> Previously convicted for illegal possession of ammunition and explosives, Bahrn Naim departed for Syria in late 2014 to join the Islamic State and has since functioned as the link between the Islamic State and Abdurrahman and Santoso.

## Power Struggle

According to Jakarta police chief General Tito Karnavian, Bahrn Naim is involved in a power struggle for the leadership of Katibat Nusantara, the Malay Islamic Archipelago Unit of the Islamic State in Syria.



*This image from a video released by al-Furat shows an Indonesian Islamic State recruit in Syria.*

Katibat Nusantara, which was established in September 2014 and is based in al-Shadadi, al-Hasakah province, Syria,<sup>23</sup> was until recently under the command of another of Aman Abdurrahman's men, Bahrumsyah.<sup>24</sup> This command position is the highest position held by an Indonesian in the Islamic State. Katibat Nusantara's size was estimated to be around 100 in 2014. This estimate was reduced to around several dozen in 2015 due to heavy losses in battles against Kurdish fighters.<sup>25</sup> Divided into distinct departments for combat fighters, snipers, heavy weapons, tactics and strategy, and military management,<sup>26</sup> Katibat Nusantara provides Southeast Asian volunteers with military, Arabic, and ideological training before "they join ISIS forces in roles ranging from front-line soldiers and suicide bombers to guards and administrators."<sup>27</sup> It also assists the families of the fighters in Syria as well as Indonesia and Malaysia.<sup>28</sup>

According to Jakarta-based analyst Sidney Jones, a power struggle for the leadership of Katibat Nusantara started in the latter half of 2015 with Bahrn Naim and fellow Indonesian Abu Jandal challenging Bahrumsyah.<sup>29</sup> In early December, a tweet appeared announcing that Bahrumsyah had tried to defect from the Islamic State but was caught and executed. This development would have provided an opportunity for Naim to make a bid for the leadership. General Karnavian believes that there is also an additional regional dimension to this power struggle pitting Indonesian jihadis against Bangsamoro jihadis from the southern Philippines to win recognition as the standard bearers of the Islamic State in Southeast Asia. Indeed, he has suggested that the Jakarta attacks should be seen as a response to pro-Islamic State Islamists in the southern Philippines associated with a range of groups, including the Abu Sayyaf Group, the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters, and Ansarul Khilafa, declaring a local fighting force of the Islamic State.<sup>30</sup>

This regional struggle pertains to the recent interest by the Islamic State in establishing a 'distant caliphate' using a yet to be designated area in Southeast Asia as a disconnected *wilayat* along the lines of the Islamic State *wilayat* in Libya. The Indonesian area under consideration is Poso in the province of Central Sulawesi, placing it in direct competition with areas in the southern Philippines. Poso's remoteness and mountainous terrain made it attractive to Jemaah Islamiyya last decade, which tried and failed to establish a secure base there from which it could establish an Islamic state. This is also the area where MIT operates and holds some territory, including jihadi training camps. MIT's leader Santoso was one of the first Indonesians to pledge loyalty to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Santoso has since used his links with the Islamic State to reposition himself among Indonesian extremists and to elevate his jihad against the police in Poso initiated in 2011 beyond the parochial. Since 2015 Bahrn Naim has been the key interlocutor with the Islamic State not just for Aman Abdurrahman but also for Santoso.

Bahrn Naim's role in the Jakarta attacks is no great surprise to Indonesian counterterrorism officers. In August 2015, Densus 88 intercepted directives and funding from Bahrn Naim in Syria for the intended bombing of a police station, a church, and a temple in Solo.<sup>31</sup> In this case, they were able to prevent the attack by arresting the operatives before they could strike. Evidence of attempted operations in Indonesia goes back even further. In February 2015, a chlorine bomb was discovered at ITC Mall Depok. It failed to explode as the chemicals did not mix properly. While this operation was not traced back to Bahrn Naim, Densus 88 officers believed it was the handiwork of pro-Islamic State returnees from Syria.<sup>32</sup>



The extent of Bahrūn Naim's role, however, remains subject to debate. According to Densus 88, he played a greater role in the planned New Year's attack, which was directly controlled from Syria while those who carried out the January 14 Jakarta attack were only indirectly linked. Densus 88 believes they were from the loose network of local supporters of the Islamic State calling itself Jamaah Ansharut Daulah.<sup>33</sup>

A similar view has been advanced by Surabaya-based analyst Harits Abu Ulya who asserted that Afif was the attack's mastermind and that Bahrūn Naim's role was an inspirational one as his writings on terror techniques served as a reference point for many local jihadis.<sup>34</sup> He further asserted that Afif had already sworn revenge on the police while in Cipinang prison for the mistreatment he suffered at the hands of the police during his arrest.<sup>35</sup>

## Conclusion

The Jakarta attack—both in terms of targets and modus operandi—fits into the broader strategy of the Islamic State to take the war to the enemy either directly or through inspiration and emulation. Jakarta must thus be seen alongside the recent attacks in Paris, Beirut, and Istanbul, as well as a foiled attack in Kuala Lumpur last July and again in January 2016.<sup>36</sup> The Jakarta attack also clearly shows that over the past year Indonesian jihadis have increased their

bomb-making capacity, and have been able to acquire weapons, in the Jakarta case reportedly from the Philippines.<sup>37</sup> The motivation among Islamic State supporters to carry out such attacks and the direct and indirect links to Syria for possible directives and funding, which have now become a pattern, is of concern. As long as these links exist, there is a good chance that Islamic State supporters will try again to target foreigners and the police.

At this point it appears that the Jakarta attack drew largely upon locally acquired capacity. Syria returnees could boost the military capacity of pro-Islamic State Indonesian jihadis in 2016 and beyond. Further territorial losses by the Islamic State in its core areas of Syria and Iraq could also increase its desire to establish more distant *wilaya*. Both would increase the threat to Indonesia.

However, it is also important to consider both the capacity of Indonesia's counterterrorism police in preventing and limiting militant jihadi activities as well as the strong resistance Indonesian Muslims have shown against the ideology of the Islamic State, including the opposition to the group from within Indonesian jihadi circles. Thus, while Indonesia will continue to face a threat from the Islamic State and may suffer from further attacks, it is highly unlikely that the Islamic State will succeed in establishing a *wilayat* on Indonesian territory in any meaningful way. **CTC**

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